

Book Reviews: Glass Half Empty vs. Cup Overfloweth: A Review and Rejoinder

WILLIAM L. BUTTS

GOODMAN, Gary. *The Last Bookseller: A Life in the Rare Book Trade.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 8vo. Hardbound, dust jacket. xi, 182pp. Illustrations. **\$19.95.**

De BEER, Lloyd, and SPEAKMAN, Naomi. *Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint.* London: The British Museum, 2021. Hardbound. Small 4to. 272pp. Extensive illustrations. **£27.99.**

OTTENS, Allen J. *General John A. Rawlins: No Ordinary Man.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. xvi, 577pp. Frontispiece, illustrations, maps. **\$35.00.**

Gary Goodman's *The Last Bookseller* is a mildly entertaining look at the oddly seamy Minnesota used bookselling scene and, when it comes to his oft-expressed rants on the future of bookselling, I disagree sharply with just about every word he writes.

There's a popular perception that dealers in old, out-of-print and antiquarian books – used books, in other words – are gruff curmudgeons who on a good day greet you with a grunt and a stink eye when you enter their shop and whose chitchat consists

of grumbling about how lousy business is. Like most stereotypes there's a kernel of truth in there and I've met my share of them. Less common is the stereotype of the hail-fellow-well-met bookseller who shows the energy of a 9-year-old, whatever their age, and shares boundless enthusiasms with their customers – or regularly catches new enthusiasms from them. Most booksellers fall within one camp or the other. Many who entered my own brick-and-mortar between 1991 and 2014 or current by-appointment model say I belong to the latter.

All this explains why the title *The Last Bookseller* annoys me beyond measure. This slim memoir opens and closes with remarkably similar sentences – “Okay, so I know I'm not the last bookseller. But I'm one of the last of a certain *kind* of bookseller,” then “And okay, I'm sorry, I know I'm not the last bookseller, but if you mean a certain kind of bookseller, I'm probably pretty close” – clearly as disingenuous as they are false. I suspect Goodman's sourpuss stance proclaiming gloom and doom for secondhand bookselling is largely a generational thing, but more on that later. Suffice it to say that many of us type two's in the book trade (in which I include autograph and document dealers, a heavily-overlapping trade) see shafts of light poking through the storm-clouded horizon.

The Last Bookseller's introduction clearly reveals a twisted perspective. “Before 2000, it took years of experience to become a successful secondhand bookseller,” he lectures. “After 2000, anyone in their pajamas with a box of books, a cup of coffee, and a cable connection could buy and sell books online.” First of all, what about the just-used adjective “successful”? It's absurd to assert that everyone entering the book business in such a fashion and knowing nothing about books will be “successful” – the overwhelming majority will fail dismally and bail out. Not only that, thought... didn't Goodman just tell us three paragraphs previous that in 1982 he “walked into a small used bookstore in East St. Paul, Minnesota, and, despite not knowing a thing about books or business, bought the

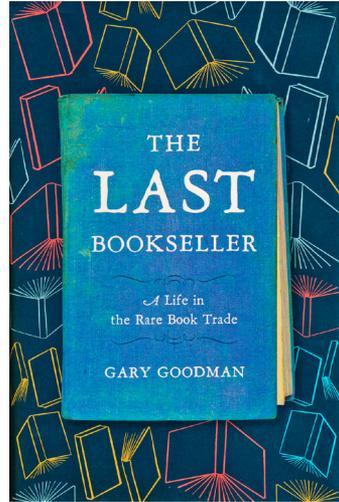
place”? Is that not the 1982 version of what he just condemned?

What’s the difference? Level of risk and outlay of capital, for sure – in his case, \$10,000 at \$100 per month for 4,000 really, *really* bad books. I certainly don’t endorse the pj’s and zero-knowledge method of bookselling any more than Goodman, but let’s be honest and get real: Goodman began with the same void of knowledge and experience as his pajama-clad brethren and it smacks of hypocrisy to belittle anyone

trying to enter the book world via the internet. You’ve got to start somewhere, after all, so constructive criticism and suggestions how to get your feet wet would be in order, not sweeping generalizations and blanket condemnation.

Goodman and I, though a decade apart in age, have backgrounds that compare and contrast nicely. Yours truly was a lifelong book and autograph collector when in the late 1980s I apprenticed under a well-known high-end specialist dealer on the 57th floor of the Hancock Building in Chicago before hanging out my own shingle in 1991, the same shingle my wife and I shelter under today. Goodman and I both founded open shops in small tourist towns around 1990 – he in Stillwater, me in Galena -- and while he retired in 2017 I still have far too much fun to imagine not doing it. You might say Goodman worked his way up from the bottom and I worked my way down from the top.

I’m going to zoom in on Goodman’s skewed view of bookselling and the future of the trade, glossing over most of the biographical framework and amusing anecdotes of *The Last Bookseller*. In the sense that it portrays used bookselling in a region underrepresented



in bookselling memoirs and *not* set in New York or Los Angeles, it's a welcome addition to the genre of bookseller memoirs. (You mean there's something *between* the East and West Coasts? Like, in the *Middle*?!) Goodman recounts the struggle to get out from under his abysmal opening stock in a gritty neighborhood... to keep his head (and that of his wife and growing brood of children) above water... to finally break free and open a decent shop with two other dealers in a quaint river town... the fizzled effort to get that town established as one of those bizarre "book towns." Autographs make an occasional appearance here – the signed copy of JFK's *Profiles in Courage* that got away, the pamphlet signed by Abraham Lincoln that not surprisingly (since Lincoln almost never signed his books and pamphlets) is a classic Fields/Sickles forgery. Along the way are the expected retellings of the book world's Bad Boys – John Jenkins, E. Smiley Forbes III, Eugene Field II, Stephen Blumberg, Mark Hoffman, John Schulman and others – and parade of crusty eccentrics and colorful well-known characters that populate the bookselling universe – bookseller/crackpot Richard Booth of Hay-on-Wye, bookseller/novelist Larry McMurtry, the ever-present A.S.W. Rosenbach. Compare it to watching reruns of a favorite sitcom ("Frasier" in my case) – enjoyable enough though there's nothing new about it.

Has the internet become the great enabler for the lowest-level booksellers, the penny sellers and those you see scanning bar codes with hand-held devices at library sales who show no interest in learning about books? Absobloodylutely! The internet dramatically lowered the entrance fee (both financially and mentally) to becoming a bookseller – though mainly at the most basic level, the bottom rung of the ladder.

Since Goodman puts forth a pessimistic, glass-half-empty point of view on the future of old books that this reviewer finds inaccurate and misleading, let me counter with an optimistic, cup-overfloweth point of view. Perhaps the "truth," if truth there be, lies somewhere in the middle.

Peppered throughout *The Last Bookseller* are oddball comments on the pre- and post-internet book scene. Goodman shows a persistent weakness for rigid black-and-white thinking that doesn't hold up. Of pre-internet book pricing, for instance, he remarks in his introduction: "Objective prices were hard to find or nonexistent, so the going rate for a book was whatever the bookseller said it was. If you didn't like it, too bad." Pure nonsense of the highest sort. Readers may love this image of a Wild West where anything goes and you either pay up or get out of Dodge, but believe it or not general economic principles such as supply and demand do apply to the market for antiquarian books and historical documents. So too does plain old common sense. Every book, every autograph, has an ascertainable track record or at least useable comparables. Sure that track record was often challenging to pin down, especially for lower-end shelf stock. But only the most foolhardy bookseller would price his wares as Goodman suggests with complete disregard for marketplace realities. Therein lies a surefire path to bankruptcy.

Moving on, "Billions of Books" is a brief, interesting chapter in which Goodman surveys the vast number of new book titles published every year and the enormous quantity of books that exist on any topic imaginable, no matter how arcane – from which he then presents innumerable personal opinions as fact. One example out of many:

"With the arrival of the internet, grandma rummaged through her attic and found rare books that suddenly weren't so rare anymore. And instead of buying a book from Molly the bookseller down the block, she could buy it online and have it delivered the next day from any Clara, Tessa, or Alexa with a cable connection. This was especially hard on midrange book dealers, who owned most of the second bookstores. The demand for a good portion of the books they relied on to make a living

evaporated. Before, booksellers had to know the price and market for books. Once this information was everywhere, booksellers had no competitive advantage over anyone else.”

Oi! Where to begin.... 1) Grandmothers almost never have “rare books,” and on the rare occasion they do they’re usually the last person to realize it. 2) Next day delivery, even pre-Covid, almost never happens even if you live in the same city as the bookseller. 3) Semi-agree that some evaporation took place over the years, but that continues to evolve and shift. 4) As for “booksellers had to know the price,” didn’t he just write “the going rate for a book was whatever the bookseller said it was”? He blatantly contradicts his just-quoted comment about objective prices being nonexistent. 5) Serious full-time booksellers (whether ABAA members or not) do maintain a competitive advantage over the hordes of amateurs and part-timers. They tend to get offered better material in the first place, their descriptions tend to blow the mass of incompetent, semi-literate descriptions out of the water, their offerings tend to consist of hard-to-find titles in better condition, their prices tend to represent real-world values bearing no comparison to the penny-seller reading copies. Goodman enjoys painting the bookselling scene with an enormously broad brush, which is unfortunate as that brush is kind of stiff and worn out and his palette limited to black, white and grey.

Every chapter of *The Last Bookseller* opens with a pithy quote, so I find it particularly ironic that Goodman quotes Leon Megginson’s “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, but the most adaptable.” His intention is to show how he adapted by opening a shop in Stillwater and marketing the concept of a “book town” to death. By 2010, his twentieth year in business – mine too, by the way -- he threw in the towel and ceased trying to sell books online. Rather than facing the internet issue head on and doubling down on what he did best, Goodman fell into the classic

symptom of a business that's lost its way: "Over the next few years I sold other things to make up for the decline in book sales. I put in globes. I sold T-shirts based on books. I sold coffee and tea, again with a book theme. . . . I tried other things as well. . . ." A local theater group staged plays in his shop monthly and he published a murder mystery set in Scotland ("a limited edition, and sales were, indeed, limited").

What Goodman ultimately fails to do is adapt to the ever-changing reality of internet bookselling. Sure those early years were a tough free-for-all in the antiquarian bookselling world. Sure there were casualties galore along the way. Eventually, though, the initial roller coaster ride of insane pricing, the so-called "race to the bottom" (which continues to this day), stabilized somewhat. Today it's easier to distinguish legitimate dealers with uncommon titles in superior condition at reasonable prices from the nameless penny sellers with worthless reading copies and those fishing for a sucker with material priced ten or twenty times the going rate. Routine copies of commonplace titles are, indeed, still a booger to sell – so weed them out of your inventory and move on.

It's difficult to take seriously a dealer who dropped out of the game a full decade ago who writes:

"By 2000 the domination of the business by the machines was complete. The once proud used bookseller became a soulless drone working for Amazon, eBay, and ABE. On the margins, things held steady into the early 2000s. It took some people, especially older people, time to find the internet, and some die-hard book people held out, Luddites at least for a while. Used booksellers, of course, were not alone. Video stores, music stores, antique stores, newspapers, taxi drivers, and new book dealers all felt the effects of the internet, but it is an underappreciated fact how extreme the effect was on the secondhand book trade."

Balderdash and poppycock. No one can refute the statistics of how many second bookshops have closed between, say, 2000 and today, should accurate statistics be available – no question that the number is high. But the “generational thing” I mentioned earlier is more likely the real reason behind a high percentage of those closures – older dealers unable or unwilling to adjust to new technology. Those who modified or reinvented their approach to bookselling, even techno-troglodytes like myself lucky to have savvy spouses, survived the transition and many prosper. Am I “a soulless drone working for Amazon, eBay, and ABE”? Not for a second, nor do any of my colleagues feel that way. I would turn the tables and maintain that these and other middleman services (Biblio, Antiqbk, etc.) are the soulless drones who I allow to move some of my inventory. Goodman, a dealer who threw in the internet towel a decade ago, failed to adapt and has little basis in reality for his biased opinions.

Antiquarian booksellers and historical document dealers adapted in classic business fashion by retooling the factory. Savvy dealers strive to jettison slow-selling stock, they focus on raising the value of their offerings, they home in on less common material (hence the explosion of interest in ephemera), they transition into other specialty areas with less internet impact such as autographs (where every item is by definition somewhat unique) and more unusual signed or association copies of books. Many work a combination of in-person sales and internet sales, with a strong dose of institutional and dealer sales in the mix as well. It’s a complex cocktail and dealers are forever tweaking it. Speaking for myself, I have sold many thousands of books and documents over the years online that may not have found the right buyer in our shop or in our catalogues. And I’ve sold many thousands of books and documents in person that may not have found the right buyer online. So when Goodman makes a bald assertion such as “Like everybody else, [business partner] Tom was losing business to the internet” – it doesn’t ring true, for if you stick at it and figure out how to work the system it doesn’t have to be true.

Those who have survived the erosion of the past couple decades are now running lean and mean. Has the internet been an Armageddon for books? Or has it been, to borrow a Wall Street phrase heard when stocks plummet, more of a long-overdue “necessary readjustment”? The “strongest of the species” quote just cited brings up the other side of that coin: Darwin’s “survival of the fittest,” so perhaps that’s a more accurate analogy to the internet’s impact on antiquarian bookselling. Meanwhile, the internet’s shine and new car smell has worn off, and while its presence is as strong as ever its impact on books and reading has leveled off. The initial rush towards reading online by some has swung the other way. Those who love it stick with it and that’s fine by me; I doubt those were our customer in the first place. Those who tried it and weren’t impressed stick with physical books.

Antiquarian bookselling still faces an uphill battle – my glasses are clear, not rose colored -- but most antiquarian booksellers I know feel cautious optimism. Most of us are hanging in there just fine, thank you very much, and every dealer I’ve queried agrees that sales during the pandemic have been surprisingly strong. Ours is an aging population, but I see an encouraging trend of younger dealers entering the trade, often spurred on by training institutions such as RBS (Rare Book School, based at University of Virginia) and CABS (Colorado Antiquarian Book Seminar, now based in Minnesota). Case in point: My friends Alexis and George Sirrakos of Kutztown, Pennsylvania, are young professionals with children who opened Walnut Street Paper several years ago. Their lists feature a fine array of interesting ephemera and books. They sell online, at a wide variety of shows and know how to use social media effectively to become better known. They are not yet a brick-and-mortar presence, but fingers crossed this may change.

The Last Bookseller is attractive enough physically, although one oddity I feel worth pointing out: the omission of an index in any modern nonfiction work is a major oversight or cost-cutting measure on the publisher’s part. Goodman should have insisted on

it. Imagine, say, an atlas that has all the cities marked on each state but lacks the alphabetical list of those cities after each map and the coordinates for finding each city – mighty frustrating.

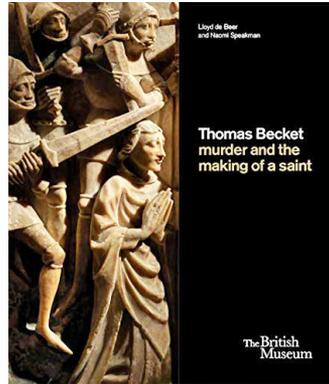
Is Gary Goodman indeed “the last bookseller” or, to paraphrase his definition, the last of a certain kind of bookseller? No – old, rare and out-of-print booksellers find a way and show few signs of extinction. Just as some felt that movies spelt the death of radio, television the death of movies and so on, there will always be those who hear a death knell tolling when new forms of communication emerge. Yet radio and television march on, as will the printed book and those who love and buy and sell them for a living. I cannot deny that *The Last Bookseller* represents Goodman’s “Life in the Rare Book Trade” as he sees it and follows the ups and downs of his path, giving a distinctive image of secondhand bookselling in the late 20th/early 21st centuries in Minnesota. But I differ strongly with his editorializing on “the dark days of the internet” and its path as we move forward and have no doubt it will prove wrong in the end.

Anyone who marveled over Christopher De Hamel’s tour de force *The Book in the Cathedral: The Last Relic of Thomas Becket*, in which this medieval scholar makes a convincing case that a specific surviving Anglo-Saxon Psalter was the very same book the Archbishop of Canterbury clutched when he was murdered in 1170 – reviewed in this column in the Summer 2021 issue – may wish to consider an exceptional exhibition catalogue published by the British Museum to accompany a spectacular collection shown there from April to August of last year. Lloyd de Beer and Naomi Speakman’s hefty *Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint* belongs side by side with Hamel’s slim masterpiece.

The 850th anniversary in 2021 of Becket’s murder occasioned this extraordinary exhibit of artifacts that humanize this ancient figure in the public mind as has none except perhaps done since

Peter O'Toole portrayed him in the 1964 film "Becket." The breadth of objects is astonishing: Drawings and illuminated manuscripts, documents, reliquaries, coins, stained glass, vestments, altarpieces, pilgrim's ornaments, architectural fragments and more.

Most importantly, unlike many exhibition catalogues, *Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint* avoids being a picture book with captions or extended captions. De Beer and Speakman's text is a meaty, substantial examination of this shadowy figure and, more significantly, a fascinating study of the aftermath of his murder for centuries afterward. It's as scholarly as it is readable. I wouldn't call the magnificent artifacts illustrated *secondary* or mere *accompaniments* to the text, but rather equal partners.



Among the plentiful objects gloriously illustrated are some breathtaking parchment documents. A grant regarding the influential monk Wibert issued by Archbishop of Canterbury Theobald (1090-1161), for whom young Becket worked, displays Theobald's oval wax seal. Surprisingly, "Theobald issued over 300 surviving charters," note the authors, "covering a vast array of business from the confirmation of rents, tithes and other gifts to mediation in disputes." A charter from King Henry II conferring privileges upon citizens of Canterbury shows that monarch's impressive wax seal. Another from Henry is a write from 1175 granting privileges to the Canterbury cathedral monks. Even though it was Henry's words that instigated Becket's murder, the authors theorize that "This was possibly placed by the king on the saint's tomb on Maundy Thursday in 1177." These three beauties can't hold a candle visually to the "Lambreth Arbitration" of later archbishop Hubert Walter, a parchment from 1200 whose "size

and lavish production were intended to enhance the legitimacy of its contents. Attached to its lower edges by an array of expensive coloured cords is an impressive display of sixteen individual wax seals, reminding the beholder of his power, authority and primacy.” Unlike these lovely specimens, the dark and dingy Magna Carta depicted “has been damaged due to exposure to damp and portions of the text have been lost. The coloured cords at the base of the document originally bore a wax impression of Henry III’s Great Seal; what little of this remains is held in place by a plastic casing.”

Of all the jaw-dropping artifacts in *Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint*, stunning illuminated manuscripts too numerous to describe steal the show. From a heavily illuminated genealogy of the kings of England (circa 1307-27) featuring a charming image of “Henry... enthroned and debating with Becket” to the famed “Becket Leaves” of circa 1230-40 which “shows the archbishop remonstrating with both Henry and the King Louis VII of France at Montmirail” and also when “Henry forced his family and household into exile,” provocative images abound. But this paltry listing of a handful of striking object from this abundance of riches represents a mere scratching of the surface. *Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint* is one of the most outstanding exhibition catalogues ever reviewed in this column’s twenty-five years. It deserves a spot on many an Anglophile’s bookshelves.

It’s not often a Manuscript Society president other than Ken Rendell brings out a book, so the recent publication of Allen Ottens’ fine *General John A. Rawlins: No Ordinary Man* is cause for celebration. The biography of a military figure may not be typical fare for this column, as it doesn’t focus on autograph, manuscripts, handwriting and such, but Manuscript Society members will want to know about it.

This memorable officer was one of the nine – count ‘em, *nine* – generals hailing from the small town of Galena in northwest Illinois and included a then-obscure young Ulysses S. Grant. Rawlins became his right hand man, then after the war served all too briefly as Secretary of War before death at the young age of 38.

A proper biography of this intriguing figure has been long overdue, and Al delivers wonderfully in this insightful, scholarly yet eminently readable cradle-to-grave account. It’s practically a first of its kind, the only other book-length treatments being James Harrison Wilson’s inadequate 1916 *Life of John A. Rawlins* and a mediocre 1952 historical novel, Louis Devon’s *Aide to Glory*. For the first time, Rawlins’ influence on Grant and his direction of Union forces has been thoroughly researched and placed in proper historical perspective in this book’s hefty 577 pages. *General John A. Rawlins: No Ordinary Man*’s reception has been so strong it’s already going into a second printing.

Anyone who has read (or, more likely, struggled to decipher) Rawlins’ horrifying handwriting knows that he is second only to Horace Greeley in terms of illegibility. Both rank highly among the most execrable of all 19th century scratches. Al should be commended for mastering this unpleasant chore.

Hat’s off to the Manuscript Society’s former commander-in-chief for shedding light on this long-neglected but important figure.

