Organization and Structure of the American Antiquarian Book Trade

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Throughout the centuries there have been a considerable number of both informal and formal book trade associations, all of them concerned with currently printed and published works. It was not until 1906 that a group of British dealers formally organized the Antiquarian Booksellers Association, and, since it was the first of its kind, added “International” to its name. Other countries followed in course of time, but, despite some abortive attempts, it was not until late 1948 that the first productive organizational meeting was held in the United States, with the consequent incorporation in 1959 of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America.

Although membership in the A.B.A.A. (as it is popularly known) is about 320, representing 260 firms, its influence is far beyond that of its small proportion of the total in the antiquarian book trade. The objects of the association, as stated in its constitution, have acted as a stabilizing force in the trade:

1. To further friendly relations and a cooperative spirit among members.
2. To stimulate interest in collecting books by private collectors and public institutions.
3. To uphold the status of the antiquarian book trade and maintain its high professional standards.
4. To encourage the advancement of the technical and general knowledge of those engaged in bookselling.
5. To act as an association in matters where individual action would be less likely to succeed.
6. To promote exhibitions of books and related material; and to obtain publicity for the benefit of the trade as a whole.

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7. To cooperate with similar organizations for these purposes, in this country and abroad.

The many A.B.A.A. projects, exhibits, leaflets, and educational materials have been of considerable aid in promoting understanding of the antiquarian book trade. Its firm policy on the credit standing of its members and its mediation of disputes between members, and between members and individuals and institutions, have been most helpful. Indeed, in a trade so individualistic, it is impressive that the A.B.A.A. has been able to maintain so cohesive a group.

As the current president, G. T. Goodspeed, mentioned in a talk to a group of New England librarians,1 “It is, of course, to be understood that many highly respected booksellers have not joined our association, and we do not represent that all our members are saints. We hope, however, that the existence of such an organization will help us to maintain a reputation for responsibility and integrity that will benefit both our customers and ourselves.”

In addition to the work of the national organization (implemented by five regional chapters: New England, Middle Atlantic, Midwest, Northern California, and Southern California), there are international advantages gained through the A.B.A.A.’s affiliation with the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers. I.L.A.B. (as it is popularly known) is made up of the antiquarian book trade associations of Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the U.S.A. The current international president is R. S. Wormser, the former secretary and president of the A.B.A.A.

The annual A.B.A.A. meetings and I.L.A.B. congresses afford an excellent opportunity for member-dealers throughout the country and the world to meet, exchange experiences, buy and sell, insure professional standards of the antiquarian book trade, and further international cooperation among its members. (There are also a few independent regional groups of antiquarian dealers in America, notably one in the Philadelphia area.)

In addition to the formal organization of the antiquarian booksellers in America, there are other earlier and continuing “methods of communication” in the antiquarian book trade in America. Book auctions, which have been discussed in another article by John Carter, are an important method of buying and selling antiquarian books, and setting standards of prices—always to be interpreted with care by expert bookmen.
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Perhaps even more important than the auction is the antiquarian book catalog. Indeed, this is so important that an entire special issue of *Library Trends* might well be devoted to this subject. Next to a history of booksellers should be a supplementary one of booksellers’ catalogs. A start has been made by Archer Taylor, but a complete study of the field is a pressing need in the book world. So many great catalogs of great booksellers come to mind that it would be invidious to fill even a few pages with some of the leading examples.

Here we can only note that the antiquarian book catalog is the life-blood of the antiquarian book trade. This is the first and favored reading of dealers and collectors—and should also be by librarians. How often does a head librarian, an accessions chief, put aside antiquarian catalogs for routine chores and new book orders, and then find in an old list the item for which he had been searching for so long? How often does he order belatedly and find: “Sorry, sold long ago” is the answer from the dealer . . . !

“The trade is its own best customer” is a truism in the antiquarian book world, and the first order of business for dealers is to turn to the latest catalogs of their colleagues, to check and order promptly the desired items, and then perhaps to re-list them in their own catalogs! Not too often—but enough times—we have watched with fascination the ascent of a “sleeper” in a grubby mimeographed list to a top desideratum in a rare book catalog!

Now we come to our own personal niche in the antiquarian book trade, the *Antiquarian Bookman: The Specialist Book Trade Weekly* and *The AB Bookman’s Yearbook: The Specialist Book Trade Annual*, which is edited and published by this author. Every major country has a major magazine which carries lists of book wants (desiderata, wants lists, etc.) of the book trade. Fellow dealers respond with “quotation cards,” advising which items they can supply, specifying edition, condition, price, etc.

In the United States and Canada, the *Antiquarian Bookman* fulfills this important function. Unique in the world, however, is the *AB Bookman’s Yearbook*, which appears annually and lists the permanent book wants of dealers throughout the world. This annual also contains “The O.P. Market: A Reference Directory of Antiquarian and Specialist Booksellers.” This list of some two thousand specialties of over a thousand booksellers has proved quite useful to librarians, as a reference tool for themselves and for private parties, both in buying and selling books.
May we immediately confess that we deliberately discourage librarians from advertising their lists of book wants in *Antiquarian Bookman*. It is not that we love librarians the less, rather that we love booksellers the more. We have always felt that libraries were best served by dealers in their own specialties, and that it was an exceptional bookman who could combine both functions of librarian and bookseller. To be sure, there are some libraries that find satisfactory other methods of procuring desiderata, such as sending mimeographed lists to a select number of dealers, using the mimeographed facilities of The Fourth Avenue Booksellers (NYC), The American Antiquarian Booksellers (Philadelphia) for their own members, etc. But we cannot help but feel that librarians employing such limited methods do not take full advantages of the complete resources of the entire antiquarian book world that are open to the experienced, specialist bookseller.

For some thirty-five years we have visited librarians and libraries throughout this country and abroad, on personal, business, and goodwill missions. We have never ceased wondering on the vast amount of ignorance—or, worse yet, misinformation—most librarians have about booksellers and the antiquarian book trade (old and rare, used, and out-of-print).

Breathes there a librarian who has not visited a bookshop and said to himself, “If I could only take a week, month, or year off and organize this place!”? Breathes there a librarian who does not consider booksellers “characters,” rugged individualists, if not anarchists, who operate independently, obtain books by sorcery, price them by cabalistic necromancy, and sell them by black magic?

But no matter where the dealer is located, in a large city, a small town, a book farm or house, on an island or on top of a mountain, there is a medium of communication in the antiquarian book trade that makes the wares of the individual dealer available to the entire book world. In what other trade can a person walk into a shop, or telephone, or inquire by mail, ask for a specific item manufactured hundreds of years ago, and obtain it in a matter of days, weeks or months, depending on how badly he wants and how much he is willing to pay for the item?

This requires a professional searching method in the antiquarian book trade, and often the dealer himself is unaware of the many complex steps in such a procedure.

The first and obvious step—sometimes overlooked—is the book-
seller's own stock. Sometimes—often, if he is a specialist in the kind of book requested—it is immediately available and the transaction is summarily concluded. Sometimes, the dealer will remember having seen the item in a colleague's store, catalog, or perhaps in the library of a collector who occasionally sells duplicates and no longer desired items.

But most often, faced with a long list of book wants, the dealer will promptly mail it to his specialist book trade weekly which will promptly print it, together with thousands of other book wants by fellow dealers, here and abroad.

At the last breakdown of the circulation of Antiquarian Bookman, it was calculated that of the 5,000-plus bookmen who get "AB," about 2,800 are antiquarian booksellers, about 500 are new book shops, and the remainder are publishers, editors, collectors, and librarians (heads, rare book librarians, accession chiefs, and just plain bookmen of all kinds, sizes, and shapes).

A goodly number of the above regularly go through the weekly issues of AB, mark off the items requested that they have on hand, and send off quotation cards, advising the advertiser that they can supply the desired titles, edition, condition, and price wanted, usually postpaid. (Quoter knows cost of postage, advertiser can only guess). Most quoters send out from five to fifty cards a week, some a hundred a week, and a few large dealers as many as five hundred a week.

But it would be a mistake to think that only dealers send "quote" cards. In recent years a number of regularly employed, as well as retired, librarians have entered into the field, making full use of their knowledge and personal libraries. In addition, many a noted publisher, editor, and collector find it pleasurable as well as profitable to dispose of some of their books through this method. Many foreign booksellers also use airmail both ways to provide prompt quotations. Indeed, so many West Coast dealers receive AB by airmail that they usually send quotations to East Coast dealers before the latter receive their own AB copies by regular third-class mail!

To be sure, not all the advertisers are so promptly supplied with copies of their desiderata. If the list of book wants comprises common out-of-print titles, the advertiser can expect 100 per cent return from hundreds of quotations of varying price, according to condition and experience (or lack of it) of quoter. But for an average list, 50 per cent is considered a good return on book wants; if items are in considerable demand and scarcity, 10 to 25 per cent is good, and repeat
advertisements ("standing," "till forbid") are usually employed for the remaining titles still needed.

There are also a considerable number of titles regularly bought and sold by antiquarian book dealers, particularly by specialists in certain fields, and for this purpose they usually employ the many sections in the AB Bookman’s Yearbook: The Specialist Book Trade Annual, especially its main feature, “The O.P. Market,” which is the most comprehensive in the field for professional bookmen.

In essence, this is the major method for procurement of desiderata by the antiquarian book trade in America, to the tune of three-quarters of a million books a year, a not inconsiderable part of the entire trade volume. There are other minor, personal, and regional methods but these can vary considerably according to immediate and transient needs.

Thus, the day of the book-scout is practically gone. Before World War II, there were many competent booksellers, fulltime, who crossed continents looking for books, supplying wants, finding “sleepers,” and the like. Today the cost of such travel is prohibitive, and only a handful of old-timers are still active, with most book-scouting now being done regionally by part-time and “moonlighting” booksellers.

In summation: there are both formal and informal organizations and methods of communication in the antiquarian book trade in America, as in the entire book world. For the antiquarian trade is truly international. There are indeed, all kinds of antiquarian book shops, with gradations from general used books up to the most rarefied strata of specialist rare books dealers, where the top desiderata will almost always eventually gravitate.

To be sure, librarians will occasionally procure a top item or lot, by private treaty, but in the long run the entire book world is best served by the antiquarian booksellers who have devoted their lifetimes to the conscious—or unconscious—purpose of all professional bookmen: Getting the right book to the right party at the right place at the right time at the right price.

References

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APPENDIX

Code of Fair Practices for Dealers and Librarians

[The following originally appeared, in a slightly different form, in The 1957 AB, and in the ALA Bulletin (Nov. 1957). It was approved at the Mid-winter Meeting (Jan. 1958) of the A.L.A. Resources and Technical Services Division with a recommendation that the A.L.A. “transmit it for endorsement to appropriate national associations of book sellers.”]

Approvals

A librarian may ask to receive from dealers a selection of new books on approval if the account is considerable and if substantially all of the approval books are retained. He cannot ordinarily request this service plus attractive discounts and other services if his purchasing is highly selective, sometimes in single copies, and if the annual volume is small.

Rare books, autographs and similar materials may usually be had on approval, when there is a need to inspect them for content, condition, binding, when the bibliographic description is inadequate, or for like reasons.

When rarities are requested on approval, they should be examined immediately and the order confirmed or should be returned promptly and with all possible care. If, as may well happen, the librarian wants to retain an expensive rarity for a time in the hope that he can thereby find someone to buy it for him, the dealer should be told this frankly. If it is not an item for which the dealer is likely to have other orders, or if he is willing to gamble on the librarian’s successful quest, he will usually agree; but if he cannot afford to risk a sale, or for any reason does not want to put up with delays incidental to such negotiations, it is his prerogative to decline an extension of the approval period.

Unsolicited items sent on approval, rare with established and reputable dealers, should be discouraged. Dealers who send unrequested approvals must understand that they do so at their own risk and that the shipments may be returned unopened at the dealers’ expense.

Auction Buying

Librarians, if they wish, should feel free to bid themselves rather than use the services of an agent at United States auctions which are, in effect, open markets. Most librarians find, however, that the advantages of depending upon a responsible agent are well worth the commission fee. The agent has opportunity to examine the books offered prior to the sale, as the librarian generally has not; he may also be better aware of the current market; and he assumes at least a reasonable degree of responsibility for books being as represented.

In arranging for the service of an agent at an auction sale, the librarian should make his instructions clear concerning the ceiling of his bid. Generally this is worked out cooperatively, the librarian making his estimate of the price an item will bring and comparing it with the agent’s and the gallery’s estimates. From this consultation the librarian decides how high he is willing to go, whether higher or lower than the joint estimate, depending, among other things, on the importance of the book to the library and the difficulty of finding another copy. The agent is of course bound to observe price ceilings.
Because of differences of practice from the United States auctions, it is advisable at foreign auctions, which are more in the nature of a wholesale market, for a library to work through a trusted agent.

**Catalogs, Want Lists, Quotations**

Libraries generally acquire rare and out-of-print books by searching dealers’ catalogs, by issuing want lists, and by advertising. It is important to libraries, therefore, that catalog entries be bibliographically adequate, that they include such essential elements as series notes, and that they describe accurately the condition of the books offered. Similarly, a library want list should be bibliographically adequate, and any dealer to whom it is sent should be told whether or not it is sent to him exclusively. In advertising, titles are cited as briefly as possible, but if a particular edition is sought it must be indicated. In quoting upon want lists, dealers must specify the edition offered, the condition of the copy, and the terms of sale. For its part, the library should act upon quotations promptly and if possible acknowledge all quotations received.

**Copying**

Manuscripts, or any other unique items, in a library’s possession on approval from a dealer or on deposit from a private person should not be copied in any way without the concurrence of the owner. Such copying often alters the market value. The value can also be affected if access to the material is given to persons not concerned with the acquisition.

If a private owner agrees to permit a copy to be made, it is well to inform him that such a copy may affect the sale of the material.

**Discounts**

A library is free to bargain for discounts and to select vendors, recognizing that discounts offered may vary widely between institutions, and that in general such discounts reflect the annual volume of business between the vendor and the individual institution, the nature of the material ordered, and the degree of incidental attention to be demanded or expected. Thus, the jobber may be able to offer a relatively high discount on multiple copies of popular books—higher than a small retailer can afford—but he cannot be expected to provide personalized services, such as procuring out-of-the-way pamphlet material, as perhaps the small retailer can.

A library is likely to spread its current book purchases among several suppliers. It may give the multiple-copy commercial orders to a jobber to be supplied at an agreed discount based on a year’s anticipated dollar volume; it may use another bookseller for more difficult-to-find current books; it may depend on yet another bookseller for out-of-print books; and it may go to the specialists for technical, foreign, or rare books and for other special categories of material. The library’s discounts customarily may range from as much as 40 per cent plus on multiple copies of current trade books to quoted net price on out-of-print or rare books, and sometimes a premium may quite appropriately be charged on special-order material particularly difficult to procure and otherwise impossible for a dealer to handle profitably.

In bargaining for discounts, the librarian must always remember that the
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terms agreed upon, and the conditions of payment, are calculated on a certain anticipated volume of orders of a given kind and certain bibliographic services. To drop a dealer in midstream without compelling reason and due warning once terms have been agreed upon is a breach of faith. On the other hand, a dealer’s failure to perform service promised or implied when the discount scale was established relieves the library from this implicit obligation.

Evaluations

Informal appraisal of the value of a book, manuscript, or collection is a technical and responsible task which it is wise to leave to recognized appraisers or otherwise competent persons whose judgment and experience can be had for an appropriate charge. A bookseller acting as intermediary for a library in a private sale or an auction will generally provide an appraisal of the property without adding an extra fee to his agent’s commission.

Appraisals by librarians for tax purposes are usually to be avoided. Often they are requested by a library donor and sometimes they are not high enough to please him. If they must be made by the librarian, he should do so as though he were an official appraiser who might have to defend his judgment in court and thereby stake his reputation as an expert and for integrity.

Generally, requests for the approximate value of a book are best answered by directing the inquirer to a bookseller or appraiser, or by referral to auction or other price records. If the inquirer is introduced to these records he should be warned that they can be only the most general guide.

Unrealistic news stories or public statements concerning the value of rare books or manuscripts are frequently released by dealers, sometimes by libraries themselves. Information made public relating to the monetary value of books and manuscripts and their rare or unusual qualities should be strictly truthful. It is usually better to stress the cultural or historical values of items than their estimated dollar worth.

Returns

A dealer accepts the return of an item supplied against a firm order only as a courtesy, except when the item proves not to be as represented, when it is found to be defective, or if it fails to follow the specifications of the order, in which cases the return can be made without a formal request. If the return is for any other reason, the librarian should first ask the privilege of returning. The nature of the material and of the vendor’s business are the determining factors in returns; for example, a current stock item from a general bookshop can be returned at no greater loss to the dealer than the waste of billing and shipping labor, and generally will be accepted from a good customer, provided of course that it comes back in the same condition in which sold, undamaged and unmarked; on the other hand an out-of-print or special order book for which there is no wide market, or a rare book which the dealer has gone to the expense of seeking out and cataloging (and for which he may have turned down subsequent orders) should not be returned under ordinary circumstances.

Sale of Duplicates and Discards

Duplicates and other unwanted library books should be dispersed of with the
idea always in mind that once off the library premises they are back in the open book market. It follows that all marks of library ownership (that is, all clearly understandable marks such as book plates and perforated stampings) must be cancelled. Usually it is enough to counterstamp such marks “discarded,” “withdrawn,” “rejected,” or with a similar word or phrase. Exceptional or valuable material whose possession by someone other than the library might appear to be irregular may be accompanied by a simple bill of sale or other document authenticating the transfer of ownership.