

Booksellers, collectors and rogues

presented by

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BOOKSELLERS, COLLECTORS AND ROGUES

In 1954 I was stationed in Osnabrück in Germany. In those days I used to do a lot of card magic, and I had taken with me a copy of a book called *Greater Magic*.

I read the book from cover to cover, looking for new items to add to my magic act. But there was one chapter I used to ignore. It was called *Magicana*, and was written by a New York bookseller, Leo Rullman. It was about collecting magic books and magical ephemera. (You will not find this chapter in your first edition.)

When I did eventually read that chapter it was a revelation – a revelation that was to change my life.

In 1983 an American came to my home and asked if he could write an article about me for a magazine in Atlanta. In it he mentioned that, as you approach David's town house, you would never imagine that it houses a very large magic collection which comprises close to 4,000 books, 15,000 magazines, 200 posters and on and on.

That was eleven years ago, today there are nearer 6,000 books and pamphlets. So from where did I obtain them? This explains the title of this talk: Booksellers, collectors and rogues.

I never leave a second-hand bookshop without having a word with the bookseller. I tell him what I collect and, if I think it is worthwhile, I leave my business card. My card gives my name, address and telephone number, and in the top left hand corner is printed *Collector of magic books, magazines and memorabilia*.

But there was a time when I would not use the term *magic book*. In the late fifties I went into a bookshop, just off Cambridge Circus in London. I asked if they had any magic books, the answer was yes, and I was shown into a back room. What I did not know was the term *magic books* was a code name for pornography. The bouncer inside the back room made it clear that I had to buy a book to get out. For a few years after that I always asked for books on conjuring.

When I was a young collector the name of Andrew Block used to come up in conversation. If I asked where his shop was, I received vague answers. I was told it was somewhere in Bloomsbury, not far from the British Museum.

I found Andrew's shop simply by asking another bookseller. I had gone into a bookshop in Museum Street, which specialised in Black Magic, to purchase a book about Houdini which was on display in the window. As I was leaving I said: "I can

never find Andrew Block's shop", and the lady in the shop directed me to Barter Street. I can understand why other collectors did not want me to find Andrew Block's shop. It was full of magic books.

Andrew priced all his books with a code, one in the front and one in the back. The one in the back was what he paid for it and the one in the front was what he hoped to get for it. I say hoped because he varied the price depending on the buyer. If he thought you could not afford a lot, he would charge you £5, more prosperous customers would be charged £10.

On one occasion I called to see him and he said: "Come back tomorrow, I have just purchased a large magic collection, and you can have the first pick." The next day I purchased over 300 books from him. I got them back to the Charing Cross Hotel in The Strand by taxi. The hotel provided boxes and I sent them all home by the Post Office. It was the largest one-off purchase I have ever made.

After selling magic books all his life, Andrew joined The Magic Circle at the age of 88. When he was 90, he took out a new five-year lease on his bookshop.

Cecil Court is situated between Charing Cross Road and St Martins Lane. It is a street of very expensive bookshops and at No. 11 is a shop called *Pleasures of Past Times*, run by David Drummond. He sells early children's books, picture postcards and books and ephemera of the performing arts. No trip to London would be complete without a visit to this shop. David Drummond is an actor, and appeared in a number of British comedy films in the fifties with people like Norman Wisdom and James Robertson Justice. The shop is very successful, but I often wonder who buys the items because a book I would be expected to pay £40 for would be priced at £95.

On one of my many trips to London in the sixties, I called into David's shop on a Monday morning. In the window were two large posters of Kassner the German magician. I asked how much they were, and was told the price was £45 each, but they had been promised to David Nixon. David Drummond said he would ring Nixon and ask if he still wanted them and, if he had not collected them by Thursday night, I could have them. At 8:30am Friday morning I was outside the shop, although it never opens until 10:30am. Today the two posters would cost £600.

Before they closed I did a lot of business with Marks of Charing Cross Road. The name may not mean anything to you, but if I tell you their address was 84 Charing Cross Road, it may ring a bell. 84 Charing Cross Road was the title of a famous book, film, play and TV programme. I saw the play in London. The stage was divided into two, Marks bookshop the one side, and an apartment in New York the other. It is the

story of a twenty-year correspondence between Helen Hanff in New York and Marks in London.

I used to think Marks was my idea of the perfect bookshop: rare books, the smell of leather and knowledgeable staff, until I found out there was a dark side to the business. They also sold books on torture, punishment and flogging.

Jimmy Findlay was the most famous magic collector I have ever known. Born in Scotland on 9th June 1904, he moved to Shanklin in the Isle of Wight where he ran the Firbank Private Hotel in Crescent Road. As an author and historian he was internationally known, and his own publications are eagerly sought after. When his tremendous collection of books, playbills, memorabilia and every conceivable side issue got so large, he closed the hotel and turned the dining room into a picture gallery and museum. The lounge became an extension to his library and other rooms contained his rare books and children's magic sets.

I was invited to stay with Jimmy and his wife Elsie for a week in October 1970. In his home I gazed, not with envy but with awe, at the priceless works he had collected over so many years. I was also proud of the fact that he trusted me enough that, on the Thursday night of my stay, Jimmy and Elsie went out to play bridge leaving me alone with his collection.

Jimmy had a peculiar sense of humour. One day we went into Shanklin to post a parcel. In the Post Office he asked the lady behind the counter if she recognised me. "No" she said. Jimmy replied: "Oh you should, he's the new Postmaster General". We were invited into a back room for coffee and biscuits, and we went. [David Price worked as a postman.]

In June 1973 Jimmy wrote and asked if I wanted to attend a convention in Paris. Before I could reply I received a letter from Elsie saying Jimmy had died. He was a kindly man, as well as being a collector and a bookseller. When I purchased a book from him, he would always include something extra. Sometimes he would include photographs of magicians, with a little note saying that, if I could tell him who the magicians were, I could keep the photographs. I think Jimmy Findlay could be best summed up by the words on his Ex Libris or, if you prefer, his bookplate, on which we read in old English the following: "On Books for to Rede is my Delyte".

His collection was left to his son, Dr David Findlay, who has a practice in St Albans. Six years after Jimmy's death, his collection came up for sale at Sotheby's, in four separate sales. I went to my bank and got them to write a letter, saying that a cheque up to the sum of £5,000 would be honoured. So armed with that letter I went to

Sotheby's Book Dept. which in those days was in Chancery Lane, by the Law Courts. The man in charge of the Dept. was Michael Heseltine, not the politician. But the real man in charge was a Mr Snelling who ran the auction room. He was *Mr Snelling* to everyone: I do not think that anyone had the nerve to call him by his first name.

I introduced myself to him, and said I had a letter from my bank. He said he did not want the letter as he assumed everyone who bought at Sotheby's was a gentleman.

In the *Daily Telegraph* of 7th July 1979 there was a review of the sale. It included the following: "The 19th century work, Thomas Ingleby's *Whole Art of Legerdemain*, published in 1815, made £390." This was the first of many antiquarian books I have purchased at Sotheby's.

Some other books purchased at Sotheby's are:

- The *Discovery of Witchcraft* by Reginald Scot, 1665, 3rd edition, from the library of The Marquis of Bute. This is the first book in English to describe magic tricks.
- The most expensive book I have purchased was *The Universal Conjuror or The Whole Art of Legerdemain*, 1826. I thought I did well to get it for £500.
- *The Amateur's Guide. The Art of Legerdemain*, 1838. This is the only known copy in the world.
- *Physical Amusements and Diverting Experiments* by Pinetti, 1784. I paid £380 for this book. A month later a copy of this book sold in New York for \$2,000.

Please do not think I get every book I try for. In March 1993 I was back at Sotheby's. I was interested in a small booklet called *The New London Conjuror*, 1826, 32 pages with a paper cover and a coloured frontispiece. I decided I would go to £1,000. When the item came up for auction, the auctioneer said: "A lot of interest has been shown in this book, shall we start at £1,200?" A German and someone on the telephone were after the book. It went for £4,700. As it was sold, there was a round of applause.

As I started to go to Sotheby's more and more, I got to know Mr Snelling: he was a great raconteur. Here are two stories about the book world he used to tell. The first was about a man who used to go to Foyles, buy a book from the Bargain Dept. for 1s. [10p], take it upstairs and sell it back to Foyles at a profit. In the end Foyles stopped buying the books back.

The second story is more serious. Mr Snelling was a friend of Peter and Helen Kroger, who used bookselling as a front to their spying activities in collaboration with book collector Peter Lonsdale, in what came to be known as the Portland Spy Ring.

Mr Snelling used to visit Peter Kroger in prison. Before his trial, and faced with the prospect of going to prison for a very long period, Kroger was extremely anxious that every dealer and collector he had undertaken to supply should have his order completed. Mr Snelling was asked to tidy everything up, to execute all the uncompleted orders, and to wind up the business.

It was in 1973, at the Harrogate IBM convention that I first became acquainted with Leslie Cole. Leslie and I had been invited to lunch by a fellow collector, Dr John Ergatoudis at his home in Leeds. During lunch Leslie asked me if I could give him any advice about collecting, as he had only just started. The advice I gave him was that if you see something you want, buy it straight away because if you go back the next day, it will be sold.

Leslie was a very rich man, money was no object. He was:

- the first chairman of the Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association.
- A one-time member of the Personnel Selection Staff at the War Office.
- A member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing.
- A member of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising.
- Chairman and Managing Director of an advertising agency, a public relations company, an exhibition design company and a publishing company. His advertising agency was the well-known Maxwell Clarke Ltd.

When his wife died he wanted something new to do. He was interested in magic, so he started to collect magic books. He used to attend almost every sale in London. At Sotheby's he always bid under the name of Till. He made arrangements with booksellers, throughout the country, that he would take anything on magic. In 20 years he built up a vast collection.

The last time I saw Leslie he said that dying was not a problem for him, it was knowing that he had so much to learn and would not catch up with it. Leslie Cole died on 1st March 1993 at Blackpool, doing the one thing that he loved most, attending a magic convention and gathering material for his collection. He was 81. Leslie had a good sense of humour, could sometimes be a little cussed, but was always good company.

It took seven vans from Sotheby's to remove Leslie's collection. Collectors throughout the world were making plans to attend the sale in London, when who should enter the scene? None other than David Copperfield, the American magician. He asked Sotheby's if three booksellers, all magicians, could look through the collection and Sotheby's agreed.

It took these booksellers four weeks to check the collection. Copperfield made an offer which was eventually accepted. So, another collection has gone to America. I find it worrying that magicians like David Copperfield and Paul Daniels have started collecting.

Harry Bosworth claimed to be the great-great-grandson of Anderson, The Wizard of the North, a famous Scottish magician. Like Anderson, he was a character. He is the only collector I have ever known who put his books in date order on his bookshelves. Quite impractical, but there is a certain logic to it.

Over the years Paul Latcham, a local bookseller, has been very good. On one occasion he was walking up Green St towards town, when I was on the other side delivering letters. He shouted: "Mr Price, catch" and he threw a small packet across the road. "If you want it, come into the shop sometime." It was a copy of *The Boys Own Conjuring Book*, 1859, with the folding frontispiece intact.

George Jenness was a bookseller and a collector, and for over thirty years we were very good friends. Whenever I was in London for a meeting of The Magic Circle or a sale at Sotheby's, I always stayed with George and Mary in Enfield for a few days. I have very happy memories of Enfield, staying up to 3 o'clock in the morning talking about magicians, books and authors. George always wanted me to give up my job with the Post Office and become a bookseller.

George was born in Enfield on 30th September 1901. At the age of twelve, he was taken to see Maskelyne and Devant's *Mysteries* at St George's Hall, London.

George's first job after leaving school was with the Great Northern Railway, later he worked for a firm in the City of London. In 1932 the firm closed and for a short time George was unemployed. With very little capital he started his own business, selling books from a barrow in Enfield market.

In 1941 he had the idea to specialise in selling magic books. This turned out to be a success, and he became the most respected bookseller in the world of magic.

In 1967 George wrote and published the definitive book on Maskelyne and Cooke at the Egyptian Hall. He came to Hereford on 11th March 1978 to give a talk to the Hereford Magical Society.

When George retired he said he would have to live to be 100, so that he could do all the things he still wanted to do.

In 1982 Sotheby's Book Department moved from Chancery Lane to Bloomfield Place, which is just off New Bond Street. It is all glass, metal, telephones and computers. As each lot is sold it is taken out of the sale room, so by the time the auction is over the room is empty. You go downstairs where your books, complete with your bill, are waiting. Sotheby's add 15% commission plus VAT to the bill. They also charge the seller 15%.

Today when you go there, you are checked out on a computer. If you have an account number you are given what looks like a table tennis bat with a number on it. Lots are knocked down to that number. All very impersonal. In the old days it was fun to mark your catalogue with the amount fetched and the buyer's name as the sale was in progress.

Sotheby's always gave the illusion that everything was sold. If something was not sold, it was knocked down to a fictitious name. They used a different name every day. They may well do the same today, only using a fictitious number.

I used to receive free catalogues for any sale containing magic. Now they send me photocopies of the appropriate pages. But one thing remains the same. You can write a cheque for any amount and they never ask for a banker's card.

Limited editions are not always what they seem. A publisher will sometimes announce that they are going to bring out a limited edition of 250 numbered and signed copies. Because of demand they realise that they could have sold more, so they print another 250 copies. They number them 1 – 250 and someone connected with the firm signs them with the author's name. They never get caught because the possibility of a customer coming across the books with the same number is very remote.

I have been ripped off once. I was asked by a man called George McIntyre if I would go through my collection and list all the books which contained ventriloquism. It took me weeks to compile the information: author, title, publisher, page number and notes were all recorded.

About six months later I went into The Magic Circle and was asked if I had seen the new bibliography on ventriloquism, which had just been published in Canada. All the information in the book was mine. George McIntyre had added nothing new. Today it is referred to as McIntyre's Bibliography of Ventriloquism.

Gentlemen, I have enjoyed this morning, remembering old friends many of them long gone. I would like to end with a quote from an American collector, Jay Marshall. He once said that if you are asked if you have read all your books, you should say that you have read all the titles.

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