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JACOB ZEITLIN

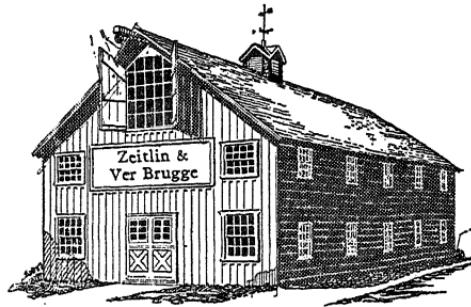
What kind of a
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What kind of a business is this?

*Reminiscences of the Book Trade
and Book Collectors*

JACOB ZEITLIN

THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS LIBRARIES

LAWRENCE

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No Introduction

For the first ninety-nine people who are likely to pick up this booklet and read it Jake Zeitlin needs no introduction. I congratulate the one-hundredth person on having discovered Mr. Zeitlin.

What kind of a business is this? purports to be the fifth in the University of Kansas series of Annual Public Lectures in Books and Bibliography. As here published, it consists of perhaps one third of Mr. Zeitlin's remarks delivered on January 17, 1958; the remaining two thirds was ad-libbed, and unfortunately, was not recorded.

Angelenos would have been delighted—and a few were—at the sight of a hundred or more people representing a variety of ages and occupations sitting around the Browsing Room of the Memorial Union on a winter afternoon. When the room was full and all chairs were occupied, still more listeners came in and sat on the floor. With the clink of coffee cups for background, Mr. Zeitlin told stories of books and people, just as if he and the audience were at home in the Red Barn.

It is especially appropriate for the University of Kansas Library to publish Mr. Zeitlin's remarks, for, as he points out, to the Ver Brugge half of the partnership of Zeitlin and Ver Brugge belongs a deep-rooted Kansas origin. Furthermore, in the world of ideas, the publishers of books, the librarians, the scholars, and the book dealers are all joyful conspirators.

ROBERT L. QUINSEY, *Editor*

THE ANNUAL PUBLIC LECTURES ON BOOKS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

First Lecture

An Informal Talk by Elmer Adler at the University of Kansas, April 17, 1953.

Second Lecture

Peter Murray Hill. *Two Augustan Booksellers: John Dunton and Edmund Curll.* Delivered at the University of Kansas, October 6, 1954.

Third Lecture

William B. Todd. *New Adventures Among Old Books: An Essay in Eighteenth Century Bibliography.* Delivered at the University of Kansas, December 9, 1955.

Fourth Lecture

Archer Taylor. *Catalogues of Rare Books: a Chapter in Bibliographical History.* Delivered at the University of Kansas, November 30, 1956.

Fifth Lecture

Jacob Zeitlin. *What Kind of a Business is This? Reminiscences of the Book Trade and Book Collectors.* Delivered at the University of Kansas, January 17, 1958.

Sixth Lecture

Fredson Bowers. *The Bibliographical Way.* Delivered at the University of Kansas, November 14, 1958.

What kind of a business is this?

IF WHAT I RECOUNT HERE IS LACKING IN MODESTY or discretion please do not put the blame solely on me. When my good friend and your most excellent librarian, Robert Vosper, invited me to speak here I proposed delivering a learned discourse on some more-or-less bibliographic topic. Your librarian, however, knew better than to expose you to one of those occasions when the speaker either talks about something you can't visualize or recollect, or comes, as I sometimes do, with slide projector, tape recorder and sound system, in fact under-prepared and over-equipped, and gives a demonstration not of ideas but of the unfailing capacity to induce sleep with which modern visual aids are endowed. He was very tactful as always, "We don't want any stuff like that from you," he said. "Just talk about some of your experiences as a bookseller and be yourself." So here goes and may you not be sorry.

Bookselling is my business. This faintly reminds me of Raymond Chandler's title *Murder is My Business*, and an episode there, in which the detective is interviewing a character without much success. He says, "He looked at me with the clear innocent eyes of a used car dealer." Bookselling has been called a very pleasant way of making very little money. That is a sweet piece of sentiment, but not necessarily true. I grant that it is not a big business, but the rewards of book-

selling are proportionate to the intelligence and imagination of the man engaging in it. Today it is an international profession calling upon the use of scholarship, a knowledge of ancient and modern languages, foreign exchange regulations, the habits and customs of all kinds of people, and all of the tact and understanding that might be expected of a diplomat.

I once characterized booksellers as being of three schools: the cheese and crackers, the nuts and sherry, and the peanuts and vinegar. All of them have their function, but I should like to think of myself as belonging to the last school. A good bookseller uses his imagination to inspire, not only himself, but those with whom he deals. He thinks not only of what he has on his shelves and what his customers are buying today, but he projects his vision to other places and to other subjects that will be sought for tomorrow by collectors whom he should seek out and inspire with his own enthusiasm. Let me give you an example out of my own recent experience. In September of 1956 I was in Florence. A bookseller there told me of a scholar who owned a manuscript of Nicolas Steno, the 17th century Danish bishop, who wrote one of the fundamental books in geology and crystallography, and made many important physiological discoveries. Six months later I wrote inquiring about this manuscript, and was told that the owner was now ready to sell. I queried the best possibilities in this country without success. Then I sat down and tried the old formula of the village idiot, who found the mule. I asked myself, "Who in all the world would want a manuscript by a famous Danish scientist?" And I answered myself, "Somebody in Denmark of course." So I wrote a friend in Denmark. "Would the Danish Royal Library be interested in this manuscript by Nicolas Steno?" The answer came back by wire. "How much, and how soon can we see it?" With me in Los Angeles, the owner in Florence, and the buyer in Copenhagen,

this was no easy negotiation. First, a price agreeable to both parties had to be settled. This was accomplished. Then the owner would not let the manuscript go out of his possession without payment. The buyer would not accept and pay without inspection. I arranged for the manuscript to be deposited with a bank in Geneva. There it was inspected by the Royal Librarian, who found it as represented, paid for it and the money was sent back to my bank in Los Angeles to be in turn paid to the owner in Florence. For this I earned a commission and the gratitude of the Royal Library in Copenhagen, the thanks of a scholar in Florence, and a pleasant feeling of having used my imagination toward a good end.

Having grown serious about the responsibility of booksellers, I shall soon proceed to tell you a few stories which may lodge doubts in your minds. But, first let me say that I have more than a few links of sentiment with Kansas. When I first began as a bookseller, I met Carl Smalley, who had a bookshop in McPherson, Kansas, from which he sold me lithographs by Birger Sandzen, and bought from me fine press books and prints of the highest quality. I marveled at his ability to sell things of such merit in so remote a place, but I did not know that even then there were people like Bishop Quayle, Flavel Barnes, Chester Woodward, E. H. Lupton, and the Nelson Kreibiels who were assembling notable collections. I didn't yet know about that stalwart group of Wichita Bibliophiles, who have come up the Turnpike to join us today. Later I did come to know well the great Dr. Logan Clendening of your medical faculty. One day Logan and I met on the corner of Powell & Post in San Francisco. "Let's go in to John Howell's and find out who wrote Shakespeare's plays," he said. So we marched in and John Howell patiently introduced us to the mysteries of the bi-literal cypher and Ignatius Donnelly and Elizabeth Gallup and their fellows. Logan was greatly amused but also

was intrigued, so he wrote me soon afterward and commissioned me to get together every book to be found on the subject. He read them all and then published his conclusions in the *Colophon*. I need not tell you that his keen analytical mind found all of the claims to be a compound of madness and moonshine. He then turned all of the books back to me to issue a catalogue, for which he wrote a charming introduction. The first and biggest buyer from this catalogue was one of the dearest of men and maddest of Baconians, Walter Conrad Arensberg, to whom the Friedmans devote a full chapter in their new book on what Logan Pearsall Smith called the Gadarene Slopes of delusion.

One afternoon in September of 1956 I stood on the high cliffs overlooking the Tagus gazing down upon the Bridge of Alcántara and feasting my eyes upon the most magical city in Spain: Toledo. Georgiana Goddard King says, "The twilight of the ages is luminous upon her; she broods aloof and fair, a place of enchantments." Beside me was a distinguished, elderly man who, like I, was gazing in rapture upon the very incarnation of El Greco's landscape. He asked me my name and when I told him he laughed and said, "I'm Ralph Major and I've a notion to throw you into the river for not talking to me sooner." We had corresponded for years and he had bought many rare medical books for the History of Medicine Collection which your University has recently housed so well in your new Clendening Medical Library building. That, I assure you, was the last of our silence for the rest of our stay in Toledo.

In the spring of 1956 I was at the University of Illinois to give a talk to an audience equally as helpless and courteous as yourselves. My wife telephoned me from Los Angeles and told me to call Joseph Shipman, Librarian of the remarkable Linda Hall Library in Kansas City. When Joe Shipman wants to talk to me I jump. He is a great enthusiast on my own favorite subject, the history of science,

and I have spent many happy moments with him looking over the notable collection which he has brought together in Kansas City. He wanted to know if I had or could get a copy of Vesalius' great anatomy, *De Fabrica*, in the first edition of 1543. Immediately upon hanging up I called a man in New York who I remembered had a copy. The next day it was delivered to me by Air Express in Urbana, and the next day I had the pleasure of delivering it to the Linda Hall Library just two hours before it was to be exhibited at the private opening for the Trustees.

If Kansas City ever runs a contest to nominate its most interesting citizen, I think Frank Glenn will win it hands down. As far back as my memory runs he has been the outstanding rare book dealer between Chicago and the Pacific Coast. His fertile imagination has ranged over many fields and he has beguiled many a middle westerner into becoming a book collector. I understand your Chancellor, Dr. Murphy, owes his bibliophilic downfall to having wandered into Frank Glenn's book shop when he was young, innocent and impressionable. Frank Glenn is a local cultural institution and ought to be endowed.

Another of the kind of book collector, who plants good seeds and nourishes the tender growths of learning in the young, is Mrs. Elizabeth M. Taylor of Kansas City whose collection of H. L. Mencken will someday make your University a place of pilgrimage. I understand she is already sponsoring, with generous prizes, an annual book collecting contest for University of Kansas students; this is a fine addition to your program of liberal education.

My association with one of your great collections here in Lawrence is of more than a slight intimacy. The pyrotechnical Ralph Ellis, who formed the great ornithology library that Kansas luckily owns, was not a man you met and forgot. Before his collection came here I often used to journey to Berkeley and spend evenings looking over his

books. Bibliomania was certainly his most moderate addiction. He was like the miner who struck gold and ordered \$40.00 worth of ham and eggs. If one copy of a good book was fine, two copies were better. So his library was overflowing with duplicate and multiplicate copies of Gould's great folios and many other books which have since disappeared from the open market. In the autumn of 1945 he turned up in Los Angeles and used my address to receive mail. He told me that Lawrence, Kansas, had proved to be unequal to the scope of his energies and that he was looking for an institution in southern California that might accept his collection. One day shortly thereafter he departed for a hunting trip to Chico, California, and the next thing I heard he had died there. By a margin of a few weeks the Ellis Collection became the property of the University of Kansas. I am pleased to see that the immense task of cataloging is going forward, and that your University is exhibiting some of the many distinguished books it contains.

In December of 1956 there passed away another Kansan with whom I had many bonds of sentiment. Although born in a sod house near Greensburg, Kansas, Everett DeGolyer ended up being referred to as "The Texan who reads Books." Not only had he become one of the world's most honored geologists and a man of immense wealth, but he also earned a reputation as one of the most knowledgeable collectors of rare books. He was a reader all his life. His collection of Shaw and Galsworthy was given to the University of Texas many years ago. His southwestern history collection is unexcelled by that of any private collector and the collection on the history of science, which occupied his later years, has become a magnet for many scholars who come to consult it at the University of Oklahoma. It was my pleasure to help him in the forming of this last collection. The finest thing I remember about him was his tolerance of disagreement. We often argued heatedly and

when I later complimented him on his willingness to accept me as a friend in spite of it, he said, "I might have been born with horse shoes in my pocket and made a lot of money, but that doesn't make me always right."

One letter he wrote me is among my particular treasures. "My only accomplishment (in Santa Barbara) was in keeping out of both the ocean and the swimming pool. Just about the time my wife had beaten down my last defense and I was about to get me dunked, I ran into a man who had lived in Santa Barbara for eight years and had managed to keep out of salt water. I left California with three resolutions effective when I make a million dollars (he already had a hundred million): first to hire you to be my librarian, secondly to acquire as my side-kick the man who kept me out of salt water in Santa Barbara (he thinks I'm funny as hell and laughs at all my jokes), and thirdly to hire one of the bartenders at the St. Francis for my own private consumption of Planter's Punches."

There is one other Kansan I must mention, and this one is the most important of all to me, both in terms of sentiment and bookselling. In June, 1937, I received a letter which started as follows: "This is an application for a possible vacancy of a temporary or permanent nature on your staff. I am a midwestern high school English teacher with research experience and the passion of a bibliophile for your work. I am twenty-three years old, five feet eight inches tall, weigh 130 pounds and present a personable appearance." It listed as further qualifications a Bachelor of Arts degree from Park College, and went on to say, "You will find me reliable, industrious and ambitious." I ask you, could you refuse to see anyone with such qualifications? Twenty-three years old, five feet eight inches tall, weight 130 pounds, personable appearance!! Next day I interviewed Miss Josephine Ver Brugge of Reading, Kansas, and found her not only all the description said but serenely beautiful as

well. It was three years before I could delude her into a partnership which included marriage and business. Now after twenty years I have no reason to doubt any of the statements she made about herself.

Some of my friends have said that I never amounted to anything until I met Jo Ver Brugge from Kansas and formed the firm of Zeitlin and Ver Brugge, and I will not deny it.

I promised you a touch of humour and a hint of the roguish about my bookish experiences, and perhaps the best tale to begin with is how I sold my first copy of Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary*. This was many years ago and I am certain that the eminent jurist involved is long dead or I would not tell this. One day I received a call from a lady who told me that the Chief Justice of one of the Scandinavian countries had been in my shop two weeks ago and had seen a fine copy of Dr. Johnson's great two volume folio dictionary. He now wished to buy this book since he was an ardent Johnsonian and wanted me to bring it to him on board a Scandinavian ship which was to dock on its return trip at San Pedro harbor the coming Saturday. Saturday arrived and I drove down to the harbor, found where his ship was berthed, and marched sprucely up the gangplank with the two heavy folios under my arms. Upon asking a steward, I was directed upstairs to the main deck and was pointed to a gentleman who was seated talking to another man whose back was toward me and therefore I could not see his face. I strode forward eagerly and as I came directly behind the standing man he withdrew and for the first time I faced my customer. I was paralyzed with astonishment; had I not been anchored to the deck with Dr. Johnson's ballast, I would have dived over the side rails. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth and I stood like an idiot as through my mind raced the remembrance of my last meeting with the Judge. Just two weeks before, one of the girls had come back to my office in great distress. She said that she was

being annoyed by a customer. I went forward and found a very neatly dressed old gentleman carrying a cane. He had wise brown eyes and a little goatee. I introduced myself to him and asked him to come outside. Then I said, "My young ladies do not care for your attentions. Please do not come back into my shop again." I turned and walked back in the door, which I closed firmly behind me. This was the man I now stood before upon the deck of a ship of the country of which he was Chief Justice, and, for all I knew, Lord High Executioner!

He looked at me with those wise brown eyes, a little smile hovered above the goatee, then he said, "I see you brought my books; please come down to my cabin." I followed, not too steadily. He put the books on a table and leafed through each volume page by page. At last he took out his pocketbook and counted off the \$200.00, handed it to me and said, "In our country young ladies regard a small pinch as a compliment."

When I returned to my shop I told the young lady of my experience. She claimed a commission on the sale because she was showing him the dictionary at the time the small gallantry occurred.

Naturally a bookseller is often close to being accused of larceny and once this was almost true. At least I was an accessory after the fact. Some fifteen years ago I went up to Berkeley to visit Dr. Herbert Bolton at the Bancroft Library. I brought him a group of very important California documents signed by General Vallejo, the last Mexican Governor of California, which had been brought to me by the descendant of an old California family. Dr. Bolton was more than casually interested. He called in two of his assistants to look them over. They brightened up as they looked and then went out. A half hour passed and then Dr. Bolton was also called from the room. He returned and said, "My boys have brought a policeman. They want me to arrest

you. Those Vallejo documents bear the marks of our library and were stolen from us." I cannot say that I was as cool as a cucumber, but I did manage to tell him how they came into my possession and he quickly recognized the historic name of the man who brought them to me as that of a gentleman who had been doing research in the Bancroft Library. I then said, "You have given me a wonderful opportunity. May I present these to your library?" He was delighted to transform me from a malefactor into a benefactor. Our visit ended with a tale from him of another scholar who had "borrowed," shall we say, from the Bancroft Library and whose saving last remark was, "Scholarship is hell on manners."

At that time Dr. Bolton told me a good story about still another scholar. The great Channing of Harvard had at last decided that he should venture beyond the western city limits of Boston. So he traveled out west to Berkeley, California. He was met at the station by a delegation of historians, was taken to breakfast, and then escorted by Bolton to the Bancroft Library. Bolton took him into the stacks of this vast accumulation of books and high piles of unedited manuscripts dealing with the history of Spain in the Southwest and more recent history of the Pacific states and Mexico. He excused himself to meet a class and left Channing to prowl for half an hour. Upon his return Channing greeted him with, "Bolton, I have sucked the lemon dry." "Channing" said Bolton, "You are some sucker."

People often ask me if I have ever found any rare books in old houses. In general I have not. Most of my good buys have been made from other dealers and from collectors. But I have had some memorable experiences in old houses and the one I shall remember longest is when I did a strange job of baby-sitting.

There is a part of Los Angeles which once was very well-to-do. The area is now blighted with cheap rooming houses,

but a few old residences still stand like faded dowagers and behind their curtained windows dwell their first inhabitants. It was to such a house I came one night to look at a library. I passed through an oaken door set with leaded glass, into a hall hung with beaded portieres and from there into a parlor furnished with spool chairs upholstered in cut velvet with fringes of red tassel. Antimacassars were still the vogue here. Dim light filtered down from a crystal chandelier twice converted, from candles, to gas, to electric light. Stiff and prim as a wax figure sat a little lady beside the inevitable marble top side table. She was dressed in watered silk and a small cameo hung from the choker band around her neck. The retired doctor who was her husband was a thin, goateed gentleman. He, too, was dressed most formally. I think I was their first evening visitor in twenty years. The air was heavy with dust and lavender.

I looked at their books: heavy, stamped leather editions of *Thanatopsis*, Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, and Gustave Dore's *Ancient Mariner*. They were good period pieces but almost worthless. Only one book caught my eye enough for me to take it from the shelf. It was on snakes. When the old man saw my interest, he said, "Do you like snakes?" "I'll never know why I said "yes." His eyes lit up. "Mother," he said, "Let's show him the babies." They conferred for a moment and he darted from the room leaving me with the old lady, who, for the first time, was smiling. It took the old gentleman ten minutes to return. I could hear him coming heavily down the stairs and when the curtains parted, there he stood with a nine foot anaconda nestled in his arms. He handed the creature to his wife and went back upstairs. This time it was only an eight foot boa constrictor he brought. For the next half hour I watched them fondle and caress these serpents and heard them talk baby talk as they held the ophidian heads close to their cheeks. They asked me if I would like to hold one of the babies. My courtesy has never

been so tested. I held baby in my lap as his coils untwisted and watched his tail creep towards the foot of my chair. They assured me he could not crush me unless he got a firm grip. The host brought out the sherry decanter and there, in the dim light, we three, with giant snakes coiled in our laps and around our shoulders, sat and toasted Raymond Ditmars and Laurence Klauber. We neglected to drink one to Edgar Allen Poe.

I bought none of their books except the one on snakes and that one only so that I could go back home with some proof of my evening's baby-sitting. When I returned home I asked my wife to smell my breath and certify in writing that I was sober before I told her my story.

You probably would like to hear of some great bargains I have bought. The best bargains I have acquired have been for relatively large sums of money. I believe and practice the gospel of the great collectors, who hold that a really important manuscript or book never costs too much.

When the William Randolph Hearst Library was being sold privately some years ago, I was sent a catalogue. There I found a letter of John Dryden which had been lost for many years despite the searches of scholars. The price was \$600.00, and I wired for it as quickly as I could reach a telephone. This letter dated May 3rd, 1655 was addressed "To the Faire hands of Madame Honor Dryden These crave admittance." It read in part, "I have scarce patience to write prose: my pen is stealing into verse every time I kisse your letter. I am sure the poore paper smarts for my Idolatry, which by wearing it continually neere my brest will at last bee burnt and martyrd in those flames of adoration it hath kindled in mee." It concluded with a sonnet which is the earliest known poem of Dryden. Did I pay too much for it? No. Neither did the librarian who bought it from me and now displays it as the crown jewel of a great Dryden

collection. I would gladly buy it back today for three times its selling price if it could be bought.

Many years ago a man from Boston by the name of Adams told me a story that illustrates better than anything else I know what collecting can mean in some people's lives. As a young man he had served on the Grenfell Mission in Labrador as a medical orderly. It was a bleak poor land and the people lived in the dreariest poverty. One day they received a call to go and treat a sick child in a remote part of the land. The orderly and the doctor went by dog sled through bitter cold and arrived after two days of travel at a poor dugout half under the earth of a hillside. The child had died. The doctor buried him and read a service over him. Then the father invited them to eat the poor fare of dried fish and with a special company treat of molasses for dessert. After the meal the father said, "I can't pay you any money, but I want to pay you with something that has value to me." Out of the rafters he took an old dry goods box. In it was a collection of match covers, maybe a hundred of them. The father said, "I want you to pick out your choice of fifty of these." The doctor did not let him down. He took a long time choosing fifty match boxes, and he wrapped them carefully and took them away as if he had been paid in gold. Indeed he had been richly paid for his collection of match boxes had meant much to their owner. They had given continuity and morale to a man's life in the midst of a hard, hopeless world.

I think this story illustrates better than anything else I can say what collecting means to some people, whether it be match boxes or postage stamps, or illuminated manuscripts, or Gutenberg Bibles.

What kind of a business is this? I would say that for me it is an exciting adventure full of many wonderful encounters and discoveries both of books and, what is more important, human beings. For me bookselling is the business of life itself and it has brought me the best things in life.