During the past few months, I have been asked about accepting as gifts two rather large accumulations of antiquarian booksellers’ catalogues. One was from a private collector who had kept his catalogues over a thirty-five-year period. The other was from a bookseller himself, who had also never been able to throw out a catalogue and had accumulated many boxes of them since the late 1960s, along with much earlier ones he’d inherited from various sources. These two potential donors came to me because they had heard that the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, under my direction, had started to save and collect catalogues a dozen years ago. This is in fact the case. As part of the Clark’s expanding mandate of building a European collection for the period 1640–1800, I began a collection of pre-1800 catalogues—booksellers’, auction, and private and institutional library catalogues. At the same time, I also started to save current booksellers’ catalogues, something my predecessors had not done in any systematic way. Relevant and high-profile auction catalogues had been kept and even catalogued, but the regular run of auction catalogues had been put out with the trash, a fate met by virtually all antiquarian booksellers’ catalogues as well. I was rather horrified by this and instantly changed the policy. Auction catalogues would be catalogued for permanent retention, and at least a large proportion of booksellers’ catalogues would be saved in an organized fashion.

All collectors, booksellers, and rare book librarians will recognize what happened in short order. I began to fill a room with catalogues, while I nurtured a growing suspicion that catalogues actually breed parthenogenetically when your attention is diverted. A dozen years ago, Karen Nipps, now at Harvard, likened them to “weeds.”¹ A few shelves’ worth grew to an overflowing roomful in no time flat; and, even with the occasional hour or two of a student assistant’s time to keep the chaos at bay, chaos came closer and closer. And while chaos loomed, never once did the need for a catalogue carefully saved and alphabetized ever arise, with only one

exception. William and Sylvia Peterson did come to examine three catalogues I was able to extract from the midden heap, as part of their learned obsession for recording every occasion when a Kelmscott Chaucer changed hands or was offered for sale. Otherwise, my hecatombs rested quietly and undisturbed on the shelves—and more and more shelves as the months wore on.

Several rules apply where the saving of booksellers' catalogues is at issue. Private collectors and booksellers themselves box them up at random as a kind of last-ditch effort to stave off discarding them, so that each box in the end has almost no order or consistency of any kind whatsoever. These boxes eventually find their way to a storage unit or garage that is unheated, dirty, and frequently infested with bugs. Since booksellers rarely date their catalogues, and few recipients think to date-stamp them, any given box doubtless sometimes possesses the basic unity represented by the month or months when the catalogues were received, but by the time anyone interested has dragged out the box in question to look inside, no date is perceptible. Other apparent traditions make looking through a box difficult. Booksellers often do not put their names on the covers of their catalogues, or they choose such a dark color for the cover that any printing is illegible in the semidarkness of a garage. Catalogues come in all sizes and shapes, from octavo to quarto to oblong to square, making it all but impossible to flip through a pile at all easily and rendering shelving awkward.

With a roomful already lurking at my back during most of my work day, I was somewhat hesitant about these two potential donations. Yet I do recognize the idiocy of paying good money for eighteenth-century book auction and book trade catalogues and not retaining current ones, which, if one takes the long view—and who more than a rare book librarian is duty-bound to take the long view?—may some day fetch equally high prices and have to be acquired through purchase by my successors two centuries hence. I agreed to review the accumulations and suggested that I would take only what we needed, which disappointed but did not dissuade the donors.

The private collector's catalogues were, as is the rule, stored in a damp, cold, dusty, buggy garage in a nice part of a neighboring town. Undeterred, I dove in and hauled each box in turn—about 100 in toto—onto a rough-hewn workbench, tore off the ancient packing tape, and started to look through the contents. I was filthy within a quarter of an hour, and my back was hurting well before I was finished. Apart from dead insects, forgotten handwritten notes, and coprolitic rubber bands, the boxes held a gallimaufry of booksellers' catalogues, thousands in all, mostly dating from the period of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. There were many names I knew very well—Maggs, Quaritch, Simon Finch, Heritage Book-
shop, James Cummins—and many I had never heard of—Bell, Book & Radmall Ltd., Piglit Books, and Nate’s Autographs, to name only three. There were glossy, color-illustrated tomes and smudged mimeographed lists. I rarely paused to examine the contents of any catalogue; but when I did, the prices were sometimes mouthwatering and of course ludicrous. Imagine an almost perfect copy of La Perouse’s *Voyage* (1797) for $4,500 (Bennett & Marshall, Catalogue 18) or the Ashendene Press *Daphnis and Chloe* on vellum for $4,250 (House of El Dieff, undated and unnumbered catalogue of books printed on vellum). At some undated moment the infamous John Jenkins did a catalogue (no. 91) of “mint books” that gave me pause. (If they are mint, are they real?) Among them was a little book of poetry by one Benneville Ottomar Hoffman, one of the legions of atrocious and lugubrious nineteenth-century American poets with three names. His *Snarl of a Cynic: A Rhyme* (1868) was in the original mailing envelope and addressed to Horace Greeley, for $15. Jenkins even illustrated it. A $15 book with a full-page photograph! David Mason, in his undated Catalogue 40, offered a pretty good *Sound and the Fury* in a pretty good dust jacket for $400. (There is a comparable copy on the Internet today, December 23, 2008, for $37,500.) Reading and writing about the prices in old booksellers’ catalogues is of course a sadomasochistic activity. From those one hundred boxes I walked away, spent and in need of a cup of coffee and a shower, with one box of catalogues, most of them local, although I kept a few others for various reasons. (I had never seen any catalogues from R. & J. Balding [Books] Ltd., for example, although I did know that the two principals were John Price and Richard Dana and that the firm was named for a bit of physiological fate rather than for two people.)

In the case of the second donor, we worked out of the back of his van, like petty criminals or fruit sellers. He brought boxes of catalogues in van loads, and I went through the first of them, some forty boxes in all, in the Clark parking lot, keeping what I wanted and committing the rest directly to a dumpster usefully at hand. Hundreds of catalogues went for recycling, but among the saved was a good run of Bill Schneider’s catalogues (a California bookseller from the 1960s and 1970s), Catalogue 1 for both Rudy Thoemmes and Simon Finch (code word: Agony), and a few William H. Robinson catalogues from the 1930s and 1940s. (Catalogue 55 had Gower’s *Confessio amantis*, 1554, in a sixteenth-century binding, for £36.) There were some clothbound Sotheby catalogues that I kept, it being for some irrational reason harder to discard catalogues in boards than catalogues in paper bindings. I kept a half dozen catalogues of Stuart Bennett Rare Books because Stuart is a friend and because his catalogues devoted to eccentrics, libertines, trulls, lowlifes, quidnuncs, and other assorted marginal types have permanent bibliographical value. And lurking among the catalogues, appropriately enough, was a copy of David Magee’s pamphlet, *A Course in Correct Cataloguing or Notes to the*
Neophyte (1958, one of 75 copies only) with its amusing glosses on the antiquarian bookseller’s vocabulary. "Miniature books," opines Magee, "are always 'charming,' 'dainty,' 'bijou' or any other adjective that comes to mind—such as 'pestilential'."2

There was also an interesting detritus among the catalogues, ranging from periodicals, to unopened mail, to the Supplement volume for the original edition of the O.E.D., to an uncashed check for $100. We junked the periodicals and the check, which was as stale-dated as a Zeitlin and Ver Brugge catalogue (Fontana’s book on moving the Roman obelisk, 1590, for $2,800, Catalogue 218).

Booksellers’ catalogues can be extraordinarily useful as a scholarly research tool. The best ones frequently contain the fruits of original research, and even those that lack anything original often collocate bibliographical and historical details that would take a lot of work to bring together again in one place. They have a key and continuing role in the distribution of old books, of course, and they usefully reflect fashions in collecting, value, and so on. No one doubts their utility, and many institutional librarians happily spend money acquiring the catalogues of earlier generations. We throw them away for one simple reason: no one has devised an indexing system for the tens of thousands of existing catalogues and the postbagsful that

2. David Magee, A Course in Correct Cataloguing or Notes to the Neophyte (San Francisco: s.n., 1958).
continue to turn up in the mail, despite the Internet. Finding any single catalogue or single entry is thus extremely difficult. If you wanted, for example, to trace the sale history of Fontana’s *Della trasportazione dell’obelisco vaticano*, mentioned above, you could pretty handily find records for many auction sales of this book in the various indices to book auctions going back a century and more. But many, many copies have not changed hands through public auction, but rather through the book trade; and it would be almost impossible to track down every copy that every bookseller has sold since the book became collectible without enormous trouble and time. (This is of course a different project from recording all the extant copies of a book, which, although also a challenging process, is not nearly so difficult.) Twice over the last dozen years the Bibliographical Society of America and the Grolier Club have cosponsored short conferences devoted to booksellers’ catalogues and catalogues generally, and on both occasions the difficulty of finding and using catalogues was stressed. The problem continues and will perhaps always continue.

Of course, today, with various electronic resources, such work is getting somewhat easier. The SCIPIO art catalogue database, to which twenty-five institutions contribute records of catalogues, remains poor for book trade catalogues and more focused on the art market. I recently searched it for Edward Millington, the seventeenth-century London auctioneer, and got only eighteen hits. The English Short Title Catalogue, by contrast, gave me 145 hits, although not every one was a catalogue. There was also, for example, an elegy on the auctioneer’s death by one Thomas Brown (not the famous one), printed in 1703, which begins “Mourn!—Mourn! you Booksellers,—For cruel Death / Has rob’d the Famous Auctioner of Breath.”EEBO—the Early English Books Online database—had 146 entries, every one of them an auction catalogue, although there seemed to be some duplicate records and quite a few records for art auctions rather than book auctions, since Millington did both. Assembling a collection of Millington’s catalogues is therefore substantially easier now than it was a dozen years ago. But then one is faced with finding individual books in those catalogues, which record the sale of tens of thousands of books, mostly, of course, described in the barest detail. It’s daunting, and no indices exist to help one navigate such a large territory with few signposts apart from basic categorizations like “Libri Theologici in Folio” and so on.

Some booksellers’ and auction house catalogues have become standard reference works, for the book trade and for collectors. One still occasionally sees citations from early catalogues such as the *Bibliotheca Anglo-Poetica* (1815) or the multivolume sale catalogue for Richard Heber’s library (1834–36), but only

---

3. An Elegy Upon the Lamented Death of Edward Millington, the Famous Auctioner [sic] (London: John Nutt, 1703). Steve Tabor of the Huntington Library kindly made a copy of this broadside for me.
in the case of extremely rare bits of English literature that for the most part have disappeared from the trade. Otherwise, the STC and Wing have pretty much made such references unnecessary. The extraordinary science catalogue issued in 1921 by Henry Sotheran known as the *Bibliotheca Chemico-Mathematica* became and remains an important reference work because of its comprehensiveness. Of course, certain major auction sale catalogues are frequently cited by dealers, including, for example, the Streeter, Bradley Martin, Doheny, and other catalogues. Descriptions in auction catalogues have grown in extent and detail over the last decades, in contrast to earlier ones, which tended to the laconic. As such detailed and close descriptions of important books often incorporated the results of original research, the catalogues in which they appeared became of permanent value. Many booksellers use the ESTC and other online databases to cite extant copies of rare books, but the more complete censuses of, say, Poe’s *Tamerlane* in Volume 6 of the Bradley Martin sale or of the Gutenberg Bible (by Paul Needham) in Volume 1 of the Doheny sale are extremely useful. Single-author catalogues, such as the Samuel Johnson catalogue issued by Maggs Bros in 1984 or the Henry Fielding list issued as Occasional List No. 92 by Ximenes Rare Books (undated) remain important adjuncts to the published bibliography of these authors.

---

**Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of America Launches New Website—www.abaa.org**

Our new website features a modern design, a fresh user interface, a proprietary database, and an improved search engine.

Browse a wide selection of books, maps, autographs, letters, and more with the confidence that you are buying from knowledgeable booksellers at a venue that is safe and easy to navigate. All material offered for sale is guaranteed to be authentic and accurately described.

Visit us today at www.abaa.org.
After twelve years of collecting booksellers’ catalogues, I decided recently that I had to do something about the room full of them that I had accumulated. It pained me, but space forbade continuing the policy of keeping so many; and so I have started to do what many people interested in building collections of catalogues have suggested. I am now keeping only the catalogues of those booksellers in my region of southern California. I made about a dozen exceptions for dealers from whom I buy a lot and whose catalogues seem worth holding onto for the time being (Jonathan Hill, Quaritch, Maggs, Arthur Freeman, Stuart Bennett, and a few others). Otherwise I gritted my teeth and asked silent pardon of St. Lawrence, the patron saint of librarians, as I disposed of a dumpster full of catalogues. It made quite a messy but impressive display, a thousand catalogues spread out over the bottom of that large skip. (I did save a good run of the catalogues of James Drake, a New York dealer in the 1930s, who sold a lot of great books to a collector named T. Marie Chilton. Ms. Chilton donated her collection to Loyola Marymount University in 1967, and my colleague in Special Collections there, Cynthia Becht, was thrilled to get this batch of catalogues as a gift.)

Of course I couldn’t help saving a few that it felt awful to be throwing away, nor could I help looking through a few others. Simon Finch’s Catalogue 40 (Simon Finch Unchained, like Prometheus perhaps) came unbound in a box and made much of the then-recent opening of his shop in Notting Hill. A great deal has happened to Finch since then, and the shop is just a memory now. Jean-Baptiste de Proyart’s Catalogue One from 2007 was very much in the tradition of the lavish catalogues of the Librairie Sourget. I apparently did not get the price list, but the catalogue runs the gamut from Valturius’s De re militari (1472) through Pierre Louÿs’s manuscript copy of Mallarmé’s poetry (c. 1890) and beyond. I do not know whether Monsieur de Proyart ever did a Catalogue 2, but this one was an impressive debut. I hated to see Mats Rehnström’s catalogues cross the bar, as it was from one of them that I bought the unrecorded first Swedish translation of Gulliver’s Travels among other nice eighteenth-century English books in Scandinavian outfits. The German auction catalogues certainly made a thump as they fell into the dumpster. Granier’s sale no. 46 (1999), a typical example, described 2,658 lots. Antiquariaat Forum’s recent catalogues have also been monumental. Catalogue 107 (2002) was three centimeters thick and contained over 500 quite amazing books. Such catalogues seem almost to spit in the eye of the Web and dare it to take over the book world. Catalogue 6 of the Zurich bookseller Adrian Flühmann must have been saved by my predecessor, and I can see why. It is bound in blue paper boards and

4. The gift of the Chilton Collection to Loyola Marymount University Library was made beginning in 1959, and books were given (on deposit at first) through the 1960s. The gift was formalized in 1967, four years before the death of the donor. (Thanks to Cynthia Becht, Head of Special Collections at Loyola Marymount University Library, for this information.)

5. Catalogue No. 2, as of this writing (spring 2009), is apparently in the works. Monsieur de Proyard was the expert involved in the dispersal of the private collection of Pierre Berès in a series of recent sales.
contains some spectacular books, among them a 1718 French Daphnis and Chloe in a Marius Michel binding (28,000 Swiss francs) and a copy of Edmond Haraucourt’s first book, La Légende des sexes, poèmes hystériques et profanes (1882) in a Charles Meunier binding that incorporates eight penises with wings among other charming motifs (13,000 Swiss francs). Last, I did not have the heart to pitch out the Bloomsbury Auction catalogue for the Jay T. Snider collection, from November 2008. My institution does not even collect Americana, but this catalogue was enormous, despite comprising only 375 lots. It must have cost the moon to produce, and it is bound in boards. I felt too sheepish to send it to recycling or to landfill.

With all those catalogues discarded, my shelves looked neat, tidy, and half empty for the first time in years. That lasted exactly one month, when the second van load arrived from my bookseller friend. He came with another twenty-five boxes; and although I was confident that I could keep just the essential box or two, and that I would not fall off the wagon in a serious way, most of what he brought turned out to be catalogues from southern California dealers. What with those (long runs for Dawson’s, Bennett and Marshall, Kenneth Karmiole, Heritage Book Shop, and the like, as well as largely forgotten minor players like Rudy Sabbot and Gene de Chêne) and some other irresistible ones (more Robinson catalogues from the 1930s, Quaritch catalogues from the 1940s and 1950s, one of the splendid Librairie Gumuchian catalogues of bindings), I kept eight boxes, exactly 80 percent of what I had just thrown away in terms of linear feet, and enough (more or less) to refill my sexy open shelves. Perhaps catalogues are like a drinking problem. Unless you simply desist, you’re done for. There’s no keeping just one or two.

6. Since completing this piece, I have been offered a European collection of 17,000 booksellers’ catalogues ranging in date from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century. Such an acquisition would increase the Clark Library’s holdings by almost 17 percent. No decision has as yet been made on this offer.