

Women in the Book Trade – Past and Present

Basis of a talk given at the London Book Fair May 2018

I have been invited to say a few words this morning about the growing number of Women in the Book Trade. I am a little nervous I have to confess, and feel that there are many other colleagues more qualified and articulate than I to speak on this subject – even more so in the wake of [Allison Devers](#) excellent piece in the Guardian last week and her fresh perspective and experience of what it is like to be a ‘bookwoman’ in 2018, and her call for more women to take up the charge to collect rare books and first editions by women authors. However, I am proud to say that I am currently the only female member sitting on the ABA National Council, (not the first and certainly not the last) and so get to be the official spokeswoman here at the fair as it were!

In an article published on the ILAB website in 2015 about Women in the Trade, they noted that only about 10% of some 2000 ILAB affiliates were women. I would hazard a guess that this figure has increased a little in the meantime. Over the last few years, the Antiquarian book trade has benefitted significantly from the recruitment of a number of highly intelligent, articulate, and passionate young women, who have either joined some of our larger established firms, or else have set up under their own steam. Rather reminiscent of the Young Booksellers Association of the 1990s, this new class of recruits started to meet informally, though these gatherings quickly grew in size and scope, and over the last couple of years has evolved into something much more meaningful: the rapid growth, on both sides of the Atlantic, of a vibrant network of women booksellers, through a series of informal gatherings, more latterly coinciding with International Book Fairs, though not exclusively so, and with the purpose of helping to keep women in the trade connected, and fostering a collegial community, in what as the statistics reveal, is still very much a white male dominated profession. This in turn has spawned a number of active social media platforms, most notably the Facebook page Women in Rare Books and Manuscripts, which over the space of a year has gained

over 600 followers. It features useful and informative posts that help to foster these trade connections, with the additional purpose of providing a platform on which all participants (regardless of gender, orientation, race, or other backgrounds) will be treated with respect. It has prompted seminars at Senate House, was the focus of discussion at last years' Book History Conference at Stationers Hall, and as my talk suggests, has put the role of women firmly 'on the agenda'.

I have been in the book trade for nearly 25 yrs now and was incredibly fortunate myself to join a firm in 1994 which had three female booksellers, two of whom were directors. If I am honest, it was only much later that I came to realise how unusual this was. Indeed, it was largely thanks to the establishment of the Women in the Book Trade network, that I came to understand, that as in many other areas of professional life, some of my colleagues, though it must be said not all, had experienced the 'glass ceiling' during their early careers, whilst many others have faced some level of sexual harassment, discrimination, or belittlement at some point. The very fact that the new generation of booksellers feel that there is a space and need for this new network speaks volumes and suggests that there is still much to be done – a fact certainly reflected in a look through the various National Handbooks of Associations. Times are changing however, and certainly the ABA, and I am sure ILAB (which since February has only its second female President) and the other National Associations, are recognising the urgent need to address the lack of diversity in the trade, and to provide support to colleagues (of any gender), who feel that they have been subjected to discrimination of some form.

As I mentioned, these networking initiatives have been largely driven by a number of the younger members in the trade, both as employees of some of the large established firms such as Maggs, Peter Harrington, and Daniel Crouch, as well as by a number of women owned companies, most notably perhaps [Heather O'Donnell](#) and [Rebecca Romney](#) of [Honey & Wax Booksellers](#) (ABAA) based in Brooklyn, NY. Amongst many wonderful initiatives begun by these two entrepreneurial

business owners, is a book collecting prize, aimed at women book collectors under the age of 30. In the UK, amongst recently established firms we find **Beaux Books** established by **Clare Trimming** in 2012 and selling rare books on art, design, fashion and photography; **Alembic Books** established by **Laura Massey** and specialising in rare books in the sciences; **Anke Timmermann** who has recently gone into partnership with Mark James and formed **Type and Forme**; and with perhaps the most innovative of all (though as yet not a member of the ABA) being the entrepreneurial **Alison Devers** and her very recent establishment of **The Second Shelf**, focusing upon the work and manuscripts of women writers, and seeking crowdfunding support for her venture. Unlike many others, as Allison admits herself, she has 'jumped in' to the trade with no prior experience at a big firm, and so brings a fresh and different perspective to our profession. Like her American contemporaries Heather O'Donnell and Rebecca Romney, Alison is doing much to promote the rare book trade, through an active use of social media, an engagement and close ties with the printed press and literary media, and excellent networking skills. I am sure that all three will be instrumental in moving our trade as a whole forward. Presidents in waiting no doubt ... The drive of this younger generation of trailblazers, who are more attuned to calling out the inequality and imbalance, is certainly helping us to find our 'collective voice' and women in the trade are certainly being listened to more, and I can assure you that feathers have been ruffled - not before time.

The trade has not been without influential 'book-women' however. As I mentioned, I was lucky enough to work for a firm which was predominantly female, even if this was unusual. **Amanda Hall** (a specialist in Continental literature) and **Susanne Schulz-Falster** (originally dealing in economics, but now more focused upon the history of printing and typography), are both highly successful in their respective fields. Some of their contemporaries, and equally successful, include **Sophie Schiedemann** (fine press books); **Wendy Cruise** (European literature); **Jenny Allsworth** (Travel specialist); **Sophie Dupre** the manuscript specialist; **Janette Ray** dealing in books on design and architecture; **Anne Marie Wall of Hinck & Wall**, specialists in garden history and horticulture; **Joan**

Winterkorn who is one of the leading rare book consultants in the world; **Janet Clarke** (gastronomy); **Jean Hedger** (childrens books); **Barbara Grigor Taylor** of **Cavendish books** (Books on Asia), and **Valerie Jackson** of **Quadille** and her amazing stock of ephemera. Also **Alex Alec Smith** (Byron and the Romantics); **Veronica Watts** (Literary crit); **Sarah Key** (childrens specialist); **Deborah Davis** (Love Rare Books formerly **McHardy Rare Books**); On the continent **Camille and Amelie Sourget** in France, and **Alicia Bardon** in Spain; **Maria Girsell** running **Hermann H Lyng** in Denmark and herself at one time her Associations' President; **Anita van Elferen** at **Knuf books** (another specialist in typography); **Dasa Pahor** in Germany (fine rare maps and prints); **Charlotte du Rietz** (books on Asia); **Angelika Friebe** (antique maps). Across the Atlantic **Nina Musinsky** (fine books and manuscripts); **Evie Eysenberg** (another great ephemera dealer); the medical specialist **Barbara Rootenberg**; **Helen Kahn** in Montreal; **Carol Sandberg** working together with Michael Thompson in LA; **Paulette Rose** a specialist in books by and about women and feminism; the recent ABAA President **Mary Gilliam** of **Franklin Gilliam** (gastronomy). To name but a few. I could go on and name check them all, but time is short, so profuse apologies to those not mentioned. In the auction world, **Meg Ford** is a Senior Director at **Christies** and Head of Books and Science, and who works alongside **Kay Sutton**; **Anne Heilbronn** is Vice President of **Sotheby's France**, **Charlotte Miller** in London, and **Cassandra Hatton** is a Senior Specialist in the US. The **Benchmark bindery** is one of the leading conservators at the moment, run by **Kathy Abbott** and **Tracey Rowledge** – Kathy passing on her expertise across the globe. Amongst collectors I point you towards **Florence Fearfington** (not only a collector but a significant sponsor of several US Institutions including Harvard); **Lisa Unger Baskin**, the foremost collector of 'women at work' and whose collection has recently gone to Duke ; and of course the legendary **Mary Hyde**, **Viscountess Eccles**, and her collection of Dr Johnson and Early Modern books now at Harvard; to name just three.

I must not fail to mention, either, that many of our Associations would not function without the hard work and dedication of people such as **Susan Benne** in the ABAA; **Angelika Elstner** the Press

officer at ILAB and of course [Nevine Marchiset](#), whose ill health has very sadly forced her to end her long association with the organisation but who has worked tirelessly on our behalf for many years. And of course our own ABA staff members, [Camilla](#), [Marianne](#), [Laura](#), [Claire](#) and [Sarah](#). There are many unsung 'heroines' in the trade.

Going further back in time, though perhaps few in number, many women dealers made a considerable impact upon the trade. Whilst the UK has only had six female ABA Presidents in its history, they more than made up for lack of quantity, by their business acumen and influence. I urge you to look up [Miss Evelyn Banks](#) (P 1932); [Miss Winnie Myers](#) 1950 (there is a wonderful account of her life by Robyn Myers on the ABA website); they were followed by [Clare Perkins](#) 1984; [Senga Grant](#) 1986; [Margaret Eaton](#) 1993; and [Elisabeth Strong](#) of McNaughtons (2000). The US has only had five female Presidents: [Leona Rosenberg](#) 1972; [Elizabeth Woodburn](#) 1982; [Priscilla Juvelis](#) 1998; and [Sarah Baldwin](#) 2010, and [Mary Gilliam](#). I am sure it won't be long until they have another at the helm. In the 65 years that the German Association has been running, only one of 19 Presidents was a woman, and in 2015 only 39 out of 217 members, though [Sibylle Wieduwilt](#) is a prominent officer of the Association. The 2015 ILAB article noted further: 'According to the ILAB directory, Austria and Denmark have three female antiquarian booksellers, there are four in the Netherlands, six in Belgium, eight in Switzerland, eleven in Australia, twenty-six in Great Britain, thirty-seven in France. There are forty-eight women booksellers in the USA, as opposed to over 450 men. Since 1947, the ILAB has had twenty-four presidents, only one of them being female'. I suspect that in the past three years those figures have improved somewhat, and certainly on the last point, as of February this year, ILAB has its second female President in the guise of the excellent [Sally Burdon](#) of [Asia Bookroom](#). Her sister [Elizabeth](#) (based in Portland) is also a successful bookseller ([Old Imprints](#)).

I have so far failed to mention possibly two of the most influential women booksellers of the 20th century: [Leona Rostenberg](#) and [Madeleine Stein](#). Lifelong friends and business partners, they ran their antiquarian book company Rostenberg & Stern Rare Books, for 60 years, and had a dazzling

inventory, a stellar client roster, lived in a style we would all like to be accustomed, and wrote dozens of books between them. They conducted some of the finest literary scholarship of their time (notably Rostenberg's work on Louisa May Alcott) and did much to promote the antiquarian book trade, participating in the ABAA (Rostenberg as President from 1972-1974) and founding the New York Antiquarian Book Fair, held annually since 1960. They may be the only two antiquarian booksellers ever to have a musical penned in their honor, *Bookends*, written by Katharine Houghton and performed at the New Jersey Repertory Company in Long Branch in 2007.

I confess, they were only brought to my attention quite recently, by [Brooke Palmieri](#) and [Fuchsia Voremberg](#), and I am just starting to read 'Between the Boards. New Thoughts on Old Books'. They certainly vividly capture the many thrills and pleasures of bookselling – thrills experienced by all regardless of gender: "As far as we know, the word *Finger-Spitzengefühl* never made it to a dictionary. It was originally Herbert Reichner [another bookseller to whom Rostenberg was an apprentice] who passed it on to us. A tingling of the fingertips becomes an electrical current of suspense, excitement, recognition. In an artificially controlled voice, one of us calls to the other, 'Look! This may be something.' And two heads look down upon the title page of a discovery. Sometimes the *Finger-Spitzengefühl* occurs on the spot as we scan the shelves of a foreign dealer. Sometimes it takes place only after the purchase has been made and we study our finds. Whenever or wherever it occurs, it is an experience that makes the rare book business a hymn to joy."

Another quote by Rostenberg also caught my eye. "If everyman is a potential discoverer, then everyman is also a potential detective. Sleuthing ranks high in the Rostenberg Antiquarian Credo and rightly so, for, at its most challenging, all research involves detection. Detection applied not to crime but to books has a special lure. It demands, at least, two indispensable abilities: the ability to ferret out those 'small facts upon which,' according to the master detective Sherlock Holmes, 'large inferences may depend;' the ability to recognize those large inferences for what they are whenever and wherever they are found."

Many women in the trade have clearly encountered prejudice, belittlement, negativity, and in some cases harassment. Nevertheless, we have persisted as they say, and thanks to our new collective voice, are challenging the conventions and changing the nature of the trade, and the days of the stereotypical raincoat clad, befuddled and somewhat scruffy looking bookdealer (aka the Ronald Searle image) are well and truly gone. To conclude, however, I would say that as I have been putting this talk together, what strikes me is quite how many women dealers really are operating at the very top of the field. I would add too, that for those in the know: those who really count and matter – ie our customers and those that we all sell to individually – be they private, institutional, aristocrat or student, museum Chief, special collection head, celebrities, or perhaps even Royalty – our gender is not an issue. What matters to them, is our expertise, wealth of experience and knowledge, honesty and integrity. As Women in the Book Trade – we have those qualities in spades.