



The Aldus Society
PO Box 1150
Worthington, OH 43085
Aldussociety.com

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Dealer in Handmade Books Filling His Mind, Not His Wallet

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

An imagined conversation, over cocktails, with rare-book dealer Bruce McKittrick:

Guest 1: "I'm thinking of having laser surgery for my eyes."

Guest 2: "The Lasik procedure? For nearsightedness?"

McKittrick: "Did you know that Antonio Benevoli conducted one of the first cataract extractions in the 1720s? He recounts the successful removal of a German soldier's cataract in *Nuova Proposizione Intorno Alla Caruncola Dell' Uretra Detta Carnosita . . .*"

Guest 1: "I did not know that."

Guest 2: "I wonder how risky the surgery was back then?"

McKittrick: "Not half as dangerous I don't suppose as being one of Mustaphato Salicio's paratroopers, circa 1686. Salicio designed a hollow mortar into which two dozen soldiers could be stuffed and shot out of a cannon over castle walls."

Guest 2: "Like Alan Greenspan, they were banking on a soft landing?"

McKittrick: "Yes, and so was the National Bank of Spain in its 1785 report on the dramatic effects of the influx into Spain of some 20 million silver pesos held in the New World during the conflict with Great Britain."

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Bruce McKittrick would be better company at a cocktail party than you or I. For starters, he reads English, French, Italian, German, Spanish and Latin.

He is fascinated by science, medicine, architecture, technology, the arts. He is a Renaissance Man . . . and an Elizabethan Man . . . and an Enlightened Man.

For 21 years he has collected and sold books made before 1800.

"I'm always being surprised by things. When I'm no longer surprised by life I guess I'll marry a Smith & Wesson," McKittrick said recently from his bookstore in Narbeth, Pa.

"Fortunately, I'm sufficiently far enough away from knowing it all that I'll be working for some time to come."

McKittrick is a connoisseur of handmade books.

“I concentrate my efforts on those books I find physically appealing: Things produced by hand are more appealing to me than books produced by machine,” he said.

“If you buy a Hemingway book, it comes in a cloth binding identical to all the other bindings, and the big deal is whether it has a dust jacket or whether it’s inscribed. And that’s it. They’re cold objects.”

Not books made before 1800.

“They were made one at a time, often for a particular purpose, for a particular person, at a particular time.

“Everything in it, from the paper and the type to the production of the binding, the distribution, all of it was done by hand.”

McKittrick attended the experimental Hampshire College in the early 1970s. At least, he was enrolled there.

“I never went to my own classes, but I did attend one of my girlfriend’s classes at Smith College. It was in the Rare Book Room. I walked in and thought, ‘This is it.’ “

He was certain that his choice of career would keep him intellectually stimulated and make him a rich man. He’s pleased to have been correct about the former and holds out hope for the latter.

“I thought I’d someday work for a wealthy private collector and life would be rosy,” he said. “That was a small miscalculation.”

Though he is still waiting for a benefactor to walk through his door and set him up in luxury for life, he doesn’t spend much time pining for financial security. He’s too busy learning.

McKittrick’s catalogs are endlessly fascinating. Not only do they include concise descriptions of rare books but also highly entertaining footnotes as well.

“I buy what I think is interesting, and I’m pretty right,” he said.

“I never buy a book thinking I’ll sell it to a particular person. That’s one of the great laws of commerce: If you don’t want it yourself, don’t buy it. I buy what pleases me.”

He still owns a handful of titles purchased 21 years ago when he launched his business with “\$35 in my pocket, no books and no customers.” But mostly he’s been successful selling the books that please him.

“The thing is, I’m in no hurry to sell a book. Some of the books I sell are over 500 years old. In some cases a book I’ve bought may not have been read by anyone for 50, 100, 200 years, until I came along,” he said.

“So you have to keep things in perspective. There’s no sense wetting your pants if you’ve owned a book for a week, a month, a year. Recently, I sold a book I’d owned for 12 years. I always thought the right person would walk through the door, and in late September someone did. He took one look at it, was thrilled and bought it.”

Strictly speaking, McKittrick is not a great businessman.

“No, I’m not. Because I’d rather buy a great book than sell one. I get more satisfaction buying and researching and writing a description of a book than I do selling it,” he said.

“When I sold the most expensive book I’d ever owned the next day, it didn’t make a bit of difference to me. But if tomorrow I buy the best book I’ve ever bought, well, I’ll be excited about that for weeks.”