Anton Gerits. *Books, Friends, and Bibliophilia: Reminiscences of an Antiquarian Bookseller*. New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 2004. 412 pp.; US \$65.00. ISBN 1584561386.

Dutch book dealer Anton Gerits began his long career in 1950 with the distinguished old firm of Martinus Nijhoff Limited in The Hague, which then had "between 100 and 150 employees," and eventually retired from his own business, A. Gerits and Son b.v., in Amsterdam in 1996. In the course of that long but fast moving period of social and cultural change, he opened up innumerable contacts and possibilities in the antiquarian book trade, not just within European circles, but in Prague, where he "appeared to be one of the first, if not the very first dealer from the West who tried to buy old books behind the Iron Curtain." He developed a considerable export trade to Japanese university libraries, and became a major supplier of books from Europe to overseas institutions. An inquiring traveller, he enriched his outlook by observing at firsthand the personalities and manners of the different societies in which he found himself. As a retrospective record of his life, *Books, Friends, and Bibliophilia* is an absorbing overview of the relationship of books to the human condition.

Gerits's abiding passion, of course, is the printed word, which to him is more than type on paper, it is the "bearer of information." As well as old books, one of his specialities was the area of antiquarian periodicals, brochures, journals, pamphlets, and tracts, and his reminiscence is crammed with titles of occasionally slightly obscure items. While some of these exceptional rarities may not be familiar to the average bibliophile, Gerits succeeds in convincing us why they are important, and effectively manages to convey his enthusiasm at each new discovery. Research and the accurate description of books are vital, he believes, not just to assess the completeness and bibliographical place of a volume, but to appreciate its context and origins. Here his approval of "a really civilized buyer" is allied to his fundamental concept of the "recognition of how important an antiquarian bookseller [can] be for a scholar." In his view, the ideal book dealer offers "expertise and integrity," and he recalled one instance when an academic "acted as if it would be preferable that an antiquarian bookseller not know when he was holding a rare printed book in his hands, as if that had to be the privilege of book historians and librarians only." Although Gerits suggests that "academics probably envy the freedom, independence, and adventurous life of the antiquarian bookseller," he maintains firmly

that "Knowledgeable antiquarian booksellers" understand their market, should not be disparaged as mere "businessmen," and their advice should be trusted.

With its wealth of references to specific sales, the book is thoroughly engrossing. For example, the National Library in Ottawa paid US \$34,000 in 1969 for a music collection of "nearly 20,000 pieces published between 1825 and 1914." In 1966 the University of Western Ontario purchased "a complete set" of the *Journal encyclopédique par une société de gens de lettres* for US \$11,340. The "central library of the University of Minnesota" acquired a very rare series of volumes for US \$20,500 which "for a number of years ... were stored secretly in one of the basements" until a particular director retired.

From his considerable experience, Gerits provides many useful hints to those considering a life in bookselling, and particularly the pros and cons of working for a large company as against the independence of self-employment. But perhaps his most pertinent observations are about the changes in the book trade itself, beyond those introduced by microformats and electronic technology. Administrative costs – tariffs, shipping and packing, administration, catalogue production – rose to threaten small booksellers who lacked the resources of large companies. The nature of private collections changed, restricting the availability of material. The institutional market shrank with "smaller and smaller budgets for rare books." Professional librarians became overwhelmed by administration: "meetings, automation, and reports increasingly kept them away from reading catalogues and buying books." In turn this preoccupation with bureaucracy affected purchasing procedures by university libraries. The blanket ordering system was no longer left to an independent bookseller, but became complicated by an "approval plan" which in Gerits's opinion "began to be handled not by knowledgeable librarians but rather by inexperienced (and cheaper) administrative staff." The note of frustration comes through clearly: "The librarian as a collector ... had been forced to make way for the librarian as a manager." Later he added, "the trade had become in my view a merchant dealing with an administrative unit."

All these constraints cut heavily into the time needed for the true bookseller to do his or her proper work efficiently. Yet Gerits wrote disingenuously, "I have never had the sense of working extremely hard." What is clear is that he had astounding energy, coupled with a definite flair that emerges in story after story of his coups. He played down the role of luck as "being alert and regarding the work you

have to do not as work but as a passion," but this only reinforces the impression we gain of his enterprising and tenacious ability, eye for opportunity, and brilliant grasp of trends.

Gerits can be forthright in his convictions and not all will agree with some of them. Laws restricting the export of antiquarian books as cultural treasures he thinks are "an anachronism" and have "harmed the legal trade," arguing that if the material is maintained in proper conservation its varied locations allow greater access, and offset the risk of disaster. He also thinks that "collectors and librarians are inclined to have more confidence in what comes from far away, rather than in what is near at hand." But his chatty style quickly draws us into this fascinating mix of insights as we warm sympathetically to the gentle, cultured personality revealed unselfconsciously behind it.

CHRIS GORDON-CRAIG
University of Alberta