and of booksellers. This scholarly but accessible publication will be useful and entertaining reading to all those who come in contact with rare books and even to the general readership interested in the marketing of antiquarian objects. Let us hope it will persuade other national associations to follow suit.

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Sheila Markham. *A Book of Booksellers: Conversations with the Antiquarian Book Trade, 1991–2003*. 2nd ed. New Castle, DE: Sheila Markham Rare Books and Oak Knoll Press, 2007. 324 pp; US \$29.95 ISBN 9781584562078

It's hard to know where to start with a book like this. Perhaps this way: I saw it listed in a catalogue and bought a single copy to see if I liked it. I wasn't twenty pages in before I ordered another twenty copies, most of which I gave to friends and clients. I'm now on my second lot of twenty copies.

If anybody wants to know what antiquarian booksellers are really like, he or she can find out in this wonderful book, a book which exists almost by accident.

Sheila Markham, herself an antiquarian bookseller, had been writing a column for a British trade magazine. She became bored and started interviewing her colleagues at book fairs and in their premises. This book is the result. As the interviews were conducted for a trade magazine, the booksellers no doubt assumed that only other dealers would see their comments, so they spoke candidly and bluntly. The details are fascinating, even for another dealer. A first edition of five hundred copies done in 2004 sold out quickly and this, the second edition, contains follow-up reports by the subjects (except in those sad entries where, instead of an update, we find a death date.)

Markham wisely deleted the questions and each interview – of which there are fifty – generally runs from three to four pages and reads like an extended monologue.

Anyone who hasn't mixed much socially with the book trade will find here perhaps the most delightful introduction imaginable. What a bunch! Given the circumstances, most dealers interviewed are British, but Markham includes a few foreign ones, mostly American, who regularly attend British book fairs or live in Britain. Our own Helen Kahn, probably the Canadian dealer most frequently seen at

international fairs, is the only Canadian found here. Even though Helen has been a friend of many years I learned things about her I hadn't known.

The most compelling impression one gains on a first reading (I've read it twice and still dip regularly) is how so many people have discovered antiquarian bookselling by accident.

Except in Britain, where some dealers followed in their fathers' footsteps (there is much talk of "stalls" and "barrows" where many of those fathers began peddling books), most dealers have fallen into bookselling by chance, refugees from an amazing variety of backgrounds. Some started in flea markets and some have multiple degrees from prestigious universities. I don't know a single bookseller in Canada, including myself, who set out to be a bookseller. Most I've known were people floundering along unhappily in society's conventional channels until gradually realizing there were possibilities stemming from the one characteristic which does seem to be universal – a love of reading and a fascination with books as objects and cultural artifacts. And having discovered their unexpected vocation, most were astounded to find that they prospered, and, more important, increasingly came to love the rewards of this fascinating but challenging way of life.

We see quite a number of husband-wife business partnerships and a higher-than-expected ratio of women booksellers. Helen Kahn states that she has never suffered any discrimination in the trade as a woman. In forty years I have never seen or heard of any woman bookseller being treated as a "little lady." Booksellers tend to be judgmental, often harshly so, and are often wittily derisive but their barbs are mostly aimed at the incompetent, the slippery, and the downright sleazy.

In the book trade we judge by our own bookselling standards – and moral ones – but the basic criteria for all is being a proper professional bookseller.

Characters abound. Eric Korn started dissecting the brains of snails at Oxford but gradually "degenerated into bookselling." Eric wrote a delightful column for many years in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which was usually a brilliant display of witty wordplay or completely incomprehensible (sometimes both at once). He regularly travels around the world with only a tiny shoulder bag, usually wearing the same T-shirt for the whole trip, which often displays food stains from the cuisines of half a dozen countries. Peter Eaton, a lifelong socialist, ended up owning Lilies, one of the stately old homes,

which he filled with books, and spent the rest of his life avoiding his customers. "They're a bloody nuisance," he bluntly states. "I could buy 50 books while they buy one."

Another bookseller states flatly that all booksellers are "lunatics," while Brian Lake (Jarndyce) states that "bookselling is the last refuge of the English eccentric." (Only the English?) Perhaps somewhere between those two quotations lies the truth, and most dealers I have known, including myself, would consider such a categorization a compliment. After all, no one does eccentricity better than the British, surely one of their greatest contributions to civilization. Who wouldn't want to be in such company?

Nor do we get the usual mealy-mouthed hypocrisy that so often permeates the public statements of any group attempting to project its own self-serving image. We get quite a few condemnations of "sharp practices" – within the trade, and also inflicted on the public. The "ring" is mentioned with distaste by several dealers but no one reaches the level of wit of Eric Korn (as usual) who states, a bit wistfully, that he has no personal experiences because no one ever thought it worthwhile to invite him into a ring.

All this makes for most refreshing reading and, most important, it provides a real portrait of a group of people who have devoted themselves to an aspect of civilization that most people take for granted, if they ever consider it.

I could write an enthusiastic piece about almost any of the fifty individual interviews in this book but since my enthusiasm must be curbed by space limits, I offer here my favourite quotation, one that I suspect most of the dealers I have known would be honoured to have as an epitaph on their gravestone. It is contributed by a man called Morten who, after beginning by stating he "breast-fed on his father's bookstall in ... a famous market for rabbits, hens and books" (only the British!) supplies this quotation: "My father drank, gambled, and fornicated, but he was a good bookseller." Hard to better that one.

Sheila Markham is to be commended. These delightful vignettes provide great enjoyment and an illuminating glimpse of a trade that very few outsiders know much about. As all the better librarians and archivists have learned, professional liaisons with knowledgeable and dedicated booksellers can bring great benefits to their institutions. Collectors, who have by necessity a much closer personal contact with dealers, already knew this. Here you will get some sense of the amazing depth of knowledge of many booksellers. Barry Shaw, the publisher who seems to have instigated all this, states in his foreword

that "Book trade history is now a serious academic subject." This book is a serious contribution to that history rendered even more compelling by being such a delightful read.

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