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**ROTA**

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**Celebrating One Hundred Years**

**1923-2023**

**December**

## Opprobrium

This may seem a gloomy subject for the season, but at this remove I can find some humour in some of these situations in which I found myself through, I think it is fair to say, misfortune rather than culpability.

To begin with, I go back to my days at Sotheby's. One hugely valuable lot was hotly contested between two pre-eminent dealers, Bernard Breslauer and Jonathan Hill. I was charged with handling the former's telephone bid. Unfortunately, there was something terribly wrong with the line. Mr Breslauer could hear me perfectly but I could only hear him intermittently and then not at all, as a result of which he was unsuccessful in his attempted purchase. He formally complained to the auction house, suggesting that I must have been in collusion with Mr Hill. To his credit, my departmental director (and, incidentally, forever grammarian), Roy Davids, responded simply, "Bernard, I really don't think they even know each other." I was fully exonerated but that did not stop Mr Breslauer from pointing me out at book fairs and loudly declaiming, "Look, there's the guy who cost me 200,000", for *years*.

I had one other formal complaint against me at Sotheby's, this time sent directly to the chairman. But this one was patently ridiculous. The claim was that, as the auctioneer, I had 'run up' the successful bidder, that is to say invented a second bidder and artificially inflated the price he ended up paying. This was something I never did, not once, which did not exactly endear me, shall we say, to some of the directors. The complaint was, specifically, that I must have indulged in that dishonest practice because the buyer was the only person in the entire world who could possibly have been smart enough to have any interest in the lot in question.

Two dealers once came up to the reception and asked for me at the end of another sale I had taken. I had got it wrong, they claimed, one had not been bidding on the item at all and the other was there to confirm that that was the case. I apologised but explained that just to be sure I would listen to the tape. "There's a tape? What tape? You mean they're recorded?" I had never seen booksellers leave the building so fast.

Following my eight years at Sotheby's, I worked for Simon Finch for two years, a mixed experience but one, especially in terms of how much I learnt in terms of the difference between being a dealer and a risk-free auctioneer (auction houses never have to put their money down after all), for which I remain grateful. Simon sent me on a round the world trip. It comprised a few days in Los Angeles for the annual international book fair and time in Tokyo, where I spent the best part of a week trudging the streets from one bookshop to the next in all weathers with an extremely heavy and valuable bag of books over my shoulder. It was pretty successful – certainly the load lightened as the week progressed. I was especially pleased to sell a special copy of an edition of *Le Morte Darthur* for, I think, something like £26,000 to one of two professors at Keio University who then took me out for dinner and very many drinks. In the morning though, the buyer appeared shamefacedly at my hotel to return the book. His wife had said their marriage was pretty much over unless he did so. I reported both the sale and the return to Simon. I couldn't help feeling that he somehow blamed me for the latter.

I had managed to arrange things so that I had also had a week's holiday in Malaysia to see one of my oldest and dearest friends, the late Willmie Jalius. I cannot now think exactly how the flights worked, but my return to London involved a brief stopover at Kuala Lumpur airport. The bag of books was with me at all times and in the overhead locker. But ... we had to get off the plane at KL for a couple of hours. I was to return to the same plane for the onward flight. I asked a stewardess if I could take the bag with me but was told in no uncertain terms that I was to leave it where it was. I was not too concerned. What could be more secure than an aeroplane parked up at an international airport? When I got back on board I immediately realised that the bag was gone. I exited the plane straight away and marched up to a pair of armed security guards – they were very tolerant of my loud and intemperate language. The flight was held up for at least half an hour. In the end though, there was nothing for it but to fly home without the books.

I rang Simon and explained what had happened. He was very good about it at first, then rang me back half an hour later and was not very good about it, which I suppose was understandable. As it happened though,

after I had been fairly thoroughly grilled by his insurance company, he was pretty quickly paid the full retail value of the books, some £90,000.

About a year later, I received an old-fashioned airmail letter at my home address in almost illegible handwriting from a family in Malaysia, claiming that they thought they may have taken my bag from the plane in error, full of valuable books. Suddenly I could visualise a large Malaysian family leaving the plane behind me with very many items of hand luggage, all black as the bag I had been carrying had been. I was apprehensive – this could, I thought, have been some very dangerous scam. What had they been doing in the meantime – trying but failing to sell them perhaps?

With Simon's permission, I rang Willmie and asked him to investigate. Willmie was street savvy and keen on the promise of a potential free trip to London. Within a week he was back in touch to say that the books were now in his safekeeping. Simon happily paid for his return flight and he got his books back. In fact he sold them quite quickly and the insurers did not expect a refund, so he did well out of it in the long term. The other bonus was that I got to spend more time with Willmie, whose trip happened to coincide with a Rolling Stones concert in London, for which I bought him a ticket. He told me that when questioned by UK Customs as to the purpose of his visit, business or holiday, he replied, "Neither, I have come to see the Rolling Stones."

This was another story that followed me for years and of course it became ever more distorted in the telling, making it seem that I had casually simply forgotten about the books and culpably lost them. I preferred the comment of a bookseller who had half-shares in a couple of the books: "If I'd known you were going to do that Julian, I would have had you take some more."

I can hardly conclude a year of reminiscences without some mention of the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association. If I have one major regret in a lifetime of bookselling, it is the time I wasted on that, especially during my two-year presidency, when it took up at least two full days a week, which is ridiculous when you have several businesses to run and when family and social life pay much of the cost. I would estimate that about half that time was spent in a worthwhile manner – dealing with sub-committees, especially export, chairing meetings, and generally trying to steer a steady ship. I had never wanted to be president, in fact I had avoided any involvement with the ABA for a long time, but it was rather thrust upon me by former president, dear Alan Shelley, who was diagnosed with terminal cancer and so could no longer continue, and others. It was, as other predecessors said to me, a duty and a service, no more than that. But it turned out that the committee (council) was riven in two. I had fondly imagined that the general idea of the association was to provide booksellers with help and support in times of trouble but there was a small clique who preferred to revel in *Schadenfreude*, were quick to point fingers and argue about the proverbial angels on the head of a pin. There was the standards sub-committee too, brilliantly wittily christened the 'double standards committee' by the office staff. I once successfully suggested a special meeting just to get all the debate about the minutiae of the rules out of the way so that we could concentrate on what was important (helping booksellers sell books, for example), but the opposition to the very idea of it was extraordinarily fierce. That was what took up the rest of my time, along with pouring oil on the troubled waters of various personal vendettas and indeed feuds between certain dealers and the office staff. It is all very well living in a time warp if you want to, but some of us have a living to make and time is precious. We are fortunate enough to be able to do so dealing in and handling beautiful objects of wonder which we love. It seems such a shame to me to waste any of that opportunity bickering over nothing very much. And not right at all, in my view, to presume upon the time of others in that way.

I've said it publicly (very nearly causing a physical fight at an ABA Christmas party) and I am not afraid to say it again – regrettably, I had chosen and was burdened with a vice-president possessed of an overweening ambition, who from the outset saw his role as a matter of undermining me at every turn and conspiring to overthrow me. The duplicity was extraordinary and there were even semi-clandestine pub meetings. As Germaine Greer once said of the world of academia, the reason it is quite so bitchy and competitive is that the stakes are so abysmally small. And as the map dealer Jonathan Potter used to say, let's not take ourselves quite so seriously, we are after all just a bunch of booksellers. Not a microcosm of Parliament as some seemed to see it.

My vice-president asked me to stand down on the basis that my judgement was clouded by the recent death of my father, which seemed a particularly low tactic. It wasn't – I was entirely of sound mind when I took the unpopular (in some quarters) decision to remove the then incumbent from his role as editor of the ABA newsletter, which he seemed to treat as a medium to vilify those against whom he had personal grudges or who just were in 'office'. The day of reckoning came at an AGM in Bath. The vice-president, a man who took pomposity and self-importance almost to an art form (and from whom, incidentally, another bookseller told me, he had learnt everything he knew about breaking books, which I abhor), was standing against me, his campaign based on a series of promises to the membership (and an entirely faulty understanding of the nature of the ABA's financial structure), not one of which he was ultimately able to keep. Having narrowly got through a vote of no confidence he had organised against me earlier in the year, this time I lost by a substantial although not entirely overwhelming margin.

An eyewitness account was published, noticing that at the moment the result of the vote was announced, a ray of sunshine happened to break into the room through a window, falling to the centre of the table where I was sitting. The pathetic fallacy perhaps, but in spite of some sadness, what I felt most was relieved, delighted to be shot of all the unpleasantness and nonsense. I continued to serve on the council until the period for which I had been voted in to do that had expired, which I felt was only right and proper, then resigned from the ABA completely. It means we cannot participate in certain book fairs, which are essential to the ABA's financial well-being, but personally I wearied of them a long time ago. I am in many ways sorry to say it is one of the best things I have ever done.

Bookselling is surely just a trade, not a calling, not an academic profession. I have no regrets about being a part of it. I spend much of my time now involved in animal rescue work which, these days, I find far more rewarding, but I doubt it would have suited me as a full-time career. Perhaps I might have been a pilot, a journalist, a teacher, or a lawyer, but the thing about bookselling is that it is mostly harmless (as mankind is described in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) and it involves a little bit of everything. It can be whatever you want it to be. Perhaps inevitably after so long, books don't excite me in quite the way that they used to, but then something comes along and there is that *frisson* again.

More festively, I am delighted to reproduce a drawing of my grandfather by Dylan Thomas and one of a series of short stories which my father and grandfather used to write together for their customers at Christmas.

Dorothea and I look forward to continuing the business founded one hundred years ago and which they fostered through both difficult and happy times, economic depressions and booms. We are not finished yet!

I thank everyone who has read these monthly reminiscences which I hope to publish in one modest volume next year, especially those of you who have provided such warm and encouraging feedback.

With every best wish for the holidays and for a healthy, happy and prosperous new year.

Julian Rota