



FIGURE I Roger Gaskell: on the edge of the Fens.

ROGER GASKELL

in conversation with Sheila Markham

The Markham Interviews

(New Series) 5

A book is like an archaeological site. Each layer has significance and meaning: on the substratum of paper with its inked impressions of type are deposited the evidence of the book's manufacture, of the way the book was handled and read, how it moved from place to place, how it was understood and appreciated by contemporary and later owners. The book tells the story of the text in a way that edited texts, or even a high-resolution digital copy cannot. And each one is different, and adds a little to the story. As far as possible, I like to buy and sell books which have not been restored, with signs of use and other evidence which can add to our understanding of the text. And I enjoy selling them to rare-book libraries where so much of the scholarship and the resources that we depend on as booksellers is generated.

I was familiar with rare-book libraries from an early age. As a small child I was taken to swim in the open-air pool at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where my grandfather H. S. Bennett, author of *English Books and Readers*, was Librarian. Then in Glasgow I would visit my father, Philip Gaskell, at work in Glasgow University Library where he was Keeper of Special Collections (though it was riding up and down in the antiquated lift that I remember rather than the old books); and then back in Cambridge in the Wren Library of Trinity College. But it was printing rather than old books that I first learned from my father. In 1953 he had founded the Water Lane Press as a bibliographical teaching press and ran it for seven years. When I took up printing as a teenager we set up a press room at home with the counterweight Albion from the Water Lane Press, a Golding table top platen and a treadle platen bought for me as my sixteenth-birthday present. We had cases of 22-point Caslon founders' type, a fount of Ehrhardt cast up in Monotype by Cambridge University Press, and some display faces. I did mostly jobbing printing but a pamphlet about Ardtornish, on the West Coast of Scotland, where we spent family holidays, exists in sheets somewhere and is the longest example of my printing.

At the grammar school in Cambridge I had an inspirational biology teacher who taught the Nuffield biology course which had recently been

introduced as part of the new approach to science teaching. The aim of the Nuffield Project was to encourage curiosity and enquiry and I went on to read Biochemistry at the University of Bristol. I feel very strongly that the sciences are as good an education for life as the humanities and it irritates me that there is still something of a hierarchical relationship between them. When it became clear that I was not doing well enough to make a career in science, at least, not in the field of research, I began to think in terms of scientific publishing or journalism. During my final year at Bristol, my father suggested that I approach Quaritch, which I dutifully did – although without much enthusiasm – and prepared by reading my father's *A New Introduction to Bibliography* and John Carter's *ABC for Book Collectors*. There was no opening at the time, but shortly before I graduated Nicholas Poole-Wilson offered me a job. I remember thinking that I would take it for a year while I worked out what I really wanted to do.

I joined Quaritch in 1973 and worked in the British Topography and Art departments before moving to Natural History, and the Science and Medicine department of which I eventually became the manager. Although I learnt a considerable amount from Howard Radcliffe in the Natural History department, there was no obvious plan on the firm's part for training me. I was fortunate to have absorbed a lot simply from my family background and being in contact with great books, booksellers and collectors. Although I had a science degree, I didn't have the type of knowledge that was relevant to the books with which I was dealing. I started to go to conferences on the history of science – not only because I was keen to learn more about the subject, but also because I was interested to discover what was going on in academic circles as this had a direct influence on institutional buying, an increasingly important part of our business which I wanted to encourage.

After eight years at Quaritch I was beginning to think about setting up on my own when Johnny Boyle suggested that I contact William Rees-Mogg, who had just bought Dawsons of Pall Mall, which had a strong reputation in the history of science. William was in the process of combining it with the English literature specialists Pickering & Chatto which he owned. The two firms were brought together in Dawsons' premises with Roger McCrow, Dawsons' manager and a specialist in books on Economics, in overall control. Johnny pointed out that William would need a specialist in the history of science and I was duly appointed to run the department, working very closely with Roger in

the early days to combine the two businesses. When Roger left after a few years to set up his own business, I became managing director of Pickering & Chatto Ltd. I've always been comfortable with technology and had designed the computer system for Quaritch, although no hardware was actually installed by the time I left. At Pickering we had an IBM PC with an 8088 chip and a 10KB external hard drive; I think we were one of the first antiquarian firms to have a computer.

It was invigorating to work for William Rees-Mogg, who has an extraordinary talent for optimism and a wide knowledge of books. He had very clear ideas about the business and inevitably we had our disagreements, but it was always a good working relationship. William was interested in the firm's history and wanted to revive the publishing side of William Pickering's original business. He came up with the idea of 'The Pickering Masters', a series of the collected works and correspondence of major figures in the history of ideas and literature, which has developed into one of the most important scholarly publishing ventures of recent years. William and I chose the subjects and I commissioned the editors. The works of Malthus, Babbage and Darwin were the first books in the series. In the case of Charles Babbage, the full range of his writing was not at all well known or appreciated when we published it in 1989 as the second title in 'The Pickering Masters'.

My work included liaising with academic editors, whose natural approach is textual, and to ensure that their editing was informed by knowledge of the physical books. Textual critics are not always sufficiently familiar with the conditions in which early publishing took place and how those conditions affect the texts that have come down to us. The experience was an opportunity to acquire further insight into the academic use of texts and the production side appealed to me very much – I was a printer again.

It was a heavy work-load, though we now had Melanie McGrath running the publishing business on a day-to-day basis. In the bookshop I was responsible for planning catalogue programmes, attending book fairs, managing staff, as well as running my own department. Meanwhile my wife and I had moved to the country and were renovating an old house in Cambridgeshire. We had young children and I had reached a point where I wanted my work and family life to be more integrated. This was surely the point to start my own business.

I left Pickering & Chatto in 1989 and started Roger Gaskell Rare Books. I had built up almost no stock before leaving the firm to avoid

any conflict of interest. I had been used to living on a good salary and knew that I had to hit the ground running. My first catalogue appeared within six months of my leaving Pickering, and contained books bought from other dealers with money borrowed from the bank, and a group of books on consignment from Richard Arkway. I think the first book I sold was a copy of Sir William Dugdale's *The History of Imbanking and Draining* that I had been allowed to buy while I was at Pickering's as Engineering was not one of our subjects. It is an appropriate book for me, living on the edge of the Fens, and it is closely related to seventeenth-century English science and the Royal Society, which has always fascinated me. It was bought by Alice Schreyer for the University of Delaware: I don't know if Alice knows that she was my first customer, but I am very grateful to her, and, since moving to Chicago, she has remained a loyal supporter. When a customer orders a book, they are in effect saying, 'This is interesting', validating your decision to buy it, research it and pass on the knowledge and the book.

My first and subsequent catalogues have been designed by Tony Kitzinger and working with him on catalogue layouts over the years has been one of my great pleasures. The first catalogue sold very well but there were some sticky years ahead in the early 1990s and I had to borrow more money. Despite the anxieties of sole trading, one of the joys of the book trade is the network of support. Booksellers are very collaborative and because many of us work on our own, there is always someone at the other end of the telephone to commiserate with, or who will check something in a reference book, or give advice on how to handle an awkward customer.

I joined the ABA Committee when the Code of Good Practice was being drawn up; the first point deals with the accurate bibliographical description of material offered for sale. When I said that a generally recognised vocabulary of technical terms was essential for describing books correctly, I was handed the job of compiling 'The Terms of the Trade', which first appeared in the 2000-1 *Handbook of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association*, and has been reprinted with minor revisions in subsequent years. Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* was conceived as 'propaganda by dictionary'. I was reminded of this phrase when compiling 'The Terms of the Trade' which contains some examples of a deliberately polemical nature, particularly in the sections on 'Provenance' and 'References'. Members of the trade have accused me of being idealistic, but I see no reason not to have the highest standards of bibliographical

description. The ABA continues to push for this, and there is certainly a better understanding today of bibliographical and copy-specific issues.

Since the publication in 1985 of William Rees-Mogg's *How to Buy Rare Books*, to which I contributed, there have been some significant changes, particularly in terms of the very different tools available for buying, selling and researching books. But the three factors in deciding, as a dealer, whether to buy a book have not changed – the intellectual content, the copy, and the rarity. These are the elements that influence the price. Obviously an extraordinarily important work can be very common and so one has to understand the effect of rarity on the price.

Although standards of presentation and description of rare books are in general very much higher than they were, I feel that the internet is having a deleterious effect because it tends to reduce everything to the lowest common denominators, the title and the price of the book. When you compare two copies of the same book online, the most obvious point of comparison is the price. Everybody likes a bargain and the internet makes it harder for the collector or the librarian to resist the cheapest copy on offer in favour of a more expensive copy, perhaps in an unrestored contemporary binding or with other attributes that are important. Digitisation is also skewing library buying at the moment. It's particularly unfortunate in the case of British books as the vast majority printed before 1800 are available as digital surrogates from Early English Books Online, and Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Given the choice of buying a book for which there is a digitised copy – even of poor quality, as EEBO and ECCO files are, being based on old microfilm – or a book for which there is no substitute, the librarian is not unjustified in choosing the latter. This in some cases makes it harder to sell English books and will result in gaps in library collections which may be hard to fill later. When every book has been digitised, librarians who are buying for text in this way will have to stop worrying about what's online or stop buying books altogether. But in any case I believe that libraries should acquire books which have information over and above the text.

Libraries will continue to buy because since the 1980s most of the money comes from restricted endowments; but what they buy will change. We're already seeing an increased emphasis on manuscripts and archives and on libraries' acquiring heavily annotated books, regardless of whether they already have a copy of the edition. In general, for printed books we will see a much greater emphasis on copy-specific

features. In my vision of the future, libraries will buy multiple copies of the same book because each one has a different attribute which adds to our understanding of its intellectual content. This will also of course be good news for bibliographers, who know that you only really understand a book when you have seen at least two copies, preferably side by side.

The thrill for me is increasingly not the buying and selling of books but the books themselves. I have done some research on the printing of illustrations in books – what I call the bibliography of images – and would like to do more. It is an area that has so far been little studied. I do a small amount of teaching in Cambridge for the Department of the History and Philosophy of Science. In December I'm giving a lecture on 'Science, Illustration and the Royal Society' in the new book-collecting series organised by the Institute of English Studies (London University) and the ABA Educational Trust. Next summer I'm teaching a course on 'The Illustrated Scientific Book' at Rare Book School, University of Virginia. I enjoy sharing what I have learnt about books and using that knowledge toward a greater understanding of book history. This is what motivates me as a bookseller.

ROGER PHILIP GASKELL, born Cambridge, 10 July 1952. **Firm:** Roger Gaskell Rare Books. **Established:** 1989. **Address:** 17 Ramsey Road, Warboys, Cambridgeshire PE28 2RW. **Telephone:** 01487 823059. **Email:** roger@rogergaskell.com **Office hours:** by appointment. **Recent catalogues include:** 41 and 42, Books from the Library of Walter Pagel; Sixteenth-Century Annotated Books: a collection of 30 editions in 18 volumes.