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**Barker, Nicolas. *Form and Meaning in the History of the Book: Selected Essays*. London: The British Library, 2003. Pp. xiii + 514; illus. CDN\$90.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0712347771.**

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In the spring of 2006, academics, librarians, and publishers in Toronto sponsored a book-collecting contest for undergraduates. None of the entries included the comic books or graphic novels one might expect of this age group. Instead, each one detailed (with an essay, an annotated bibliography, and a parcel of inked paper) a small but coherent collection of printed books — codex volumes or pamphlets. The subject-matter ranged from liturgical works to Canadian literature, and the winning entry will join a North-America-wide competition. The judges — including the principal of St Michael's College in the University of Toronto, the Director of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, and a manager from Penguin Group (Canada) — each praised the young collectors' passion, determination, knowledge, and meticulousness. These adjudicators, whose working lives are spent in the world of the book, have a professional interest in developing the habit of collecting in a new generation. With advice and encouragement, it might grow into a consuming interest, and perhaps eventually result in the preservation of rare material.

Before very long, beginning collectors encounter questions about the objects they have acquired or might acquire — perhaps the sequence, or the provenance, or the condition of the material book, or maybe the authorship or publishing or readership of the text it embodies. They may suspect forgery, or perhaps they wonder about the ethics of owning a volume that once formed part of an intact library, now dispersed and dismembered. They may learn from book dealers or librarians of the existence of a prestigious periodical, *The Book Collector*, whose editorials, articles and book reviews provide authoritative answers, and now they can initiate their education by reading *Form and Meaning in the History of the Book*, a collection of editorials, articles, lectures, and book reviews written over the course of forty years by the editor of *The Book Collector*, Nicolas Barker.

The publication of this volume marked the seventieth birthday of its author. Barker's working life and the acquisition of his knowledge happened in a world distant from the kinds of careers that our undergraduate collectors might envision. Imagining anything but an academic appointment for an aspiring historian of the book in the twenty-first century is difficult but Barker began by learning and practicing the work of publishing, typesetting, printing, and editing in a number of British firms. He later became Deputy Keeper of the British Library with "various responsibilities for the historic collections" (xii), as Alan Bell tells us in a brief Introduction. Barker became editor of *The Book Collector*

in 1965 and his essays still mark it with a distinctive and formidably knowledgeable voice of authority.

The book consists of forty essays, mostly from *The Book Collector*, but also from other periodicals, from chapters in books, and from addresses to learned bodies. The earliest is dated 1963 and the latest 2001. The essays are grouped into seven broad themes: Books and Texts, Medieval and Later; Typography and Early Printing; History of the Book; Forgery; Books and People; Bookselling; Libraries or Who Cares About Old Books?; and a brief Coda, "The Edible Book." Barker introduces the material with a five-line "Author's Note" stating that the pieces have been reprinted as they originally stood apart from a few additions and corrections. "The occasions on which they were written precluded more substantial revision, however necessary," he remarks, "but I hope to be able to address some of the themes again in the future" (xiv). Bell's Introduction helps explain the odd combination of journalistic deadlines with scholarly precision, affectionately remembering "essays drafted swiftly (until the lap-top arrived) in enviably straight lines in a fluent italic hand on large sheets of paper, often produced late at night after social obligations were at an end" (xii). This provides a helpful background for approaching the text, where the typical piece begins in the midst of a bibliographical problem without explaining its context. The essays were not only written to a publishing deadline but also addressed to an audience of knowledgeable specialist readers. This makes them difficult for generalist readers but the aspiring specialist will find that the effort required to decode Barker's approach is worthwhile.

As examples both of the difficulties and the rewards, we might examine more closely two essays: one on a thematic issue, the history of the book as a field of study; and the other analyzing a specific bibliographical question. "Reflections on the History of the Book," was first published in the journal in Spring 1990. After quoting Robert Darnton's enthusiastic introduction to the "new" book history as a field of study, Barker asks: "Well, who would have thought that we — us librarians — have been entertaining angels unawares, still less that we've slept through such a revolution, so much exciting novelty" (271). His point is that historians have only recently discovered what librarians, book collectors, and the editor of *The Book Collector* have known all along. The argument is illustrated by references to manuscripts, printing, and literature from classical to modern times. The range of knowledge and expertise that Barker deploys with such apparent ease is disconcerting — one imagines it producing thesis-writer's block in the aspiring doctoral candidate. Nor is his dismissal of the historian's disciplinary approach — so different from that of the librarian — any more courteous than is Darnton's of the bibliographer's method and practice. "History is essentially narrative," insists Barker, whereas "the book" is an abstraction and "and you can't tell a story about abstractions" (270). Needless to say, most contemporary historical practitioners will differ with this statement and be troubled by its dogmatic tone. Many of us have nevertheless a lot to learn from Barker's passionate insistence that "Books are important . . . because every copy of every edition of every book is evidence of a host of human interests and activities . . . since it continues long after the movements of the book trade that brought each book into existence" (277).

Now for an example of such evidence: "A Note on the Bibliography of Gibbon, 1776-1802" was first published in *The Library*, the journal of the Bibliographical Society, in 1963. After acknowledging that the sequence of Gibbon's early editions is complex, the essay moves straight into the Strahan papers, an archival collection of printer's records that document the publication of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The way that Barker frames the question, however, means that the reader who is interested in broader themes will not necessarily recognize that this "note" offers evidence for understanding Gibbon's life, or eighteenth-century publishing customs, or the practices of Strahan and other printers. Rather, the intellectual problematic of this chapter is restricted to the account

emerging from the archival collection and it is laid to rest by that documentary evidence. As a result, the scholar who may well find, in this essay, valuable approaches to those wider problems will have to take the trouble to learn how to read it. An immersion in *Form and Meaning in the History of the Book* will provide the necessary practice.