

Some Late Great Bookmen of the San Francisco Bay Area

by JACOB ZEITLIN

On February 16, 1985, Jacob Zeitlin, longtime international bookseller in Los Angeles, spoke informally to a luncheon gathering of members of the Associates and the Friends of the Library of the University of California, Davis. The occasion was the Antiquarian Bookfair; the place, Showplace Square, San Francisco. Mr. Zeitlin's work has brought him to the Bay Area repeatedly over the past fifty-eight years. His talk has been edited slightly for publication.

MY RECOLLECTIONS of San Francisco book people go back to 1927 when I came up on the train from Los Angeles as a very young book dealer in search of new connections. That was the first of many, many trips to the Bay Area, and my affection for this city grew with the warmth of my friendships.

My first call was to The Sign of the Lantern, the bookshop of Leon Gelber and Ted Lilienthal at 336 Sutter Street. They took me to Coppa's in the alley, a restaurant whose walls had been decorated by Maynard Dixon. Two years later, I exhibited Maynard Dixon's works in my shop in Los Angeles.

We lunched with Colonel Charles Erskine Scott Wood and his wife Sara. He was a bearded veteran of the Indian Wars who had published Mark Twain's *1601: Conversation As It Was by the Fireside in the Time of the Tudors* in 1882 when he was adjutant at West Point. Now, forty-five years later, he had just published *Heavenly Discourses*, a collection of satirical dialogues that he had written for *The Masses* during World War I. Mrs. Wood, some thirty years younger than he, was a feminist leader in civil liberties in the Bay Area and a poet.

A man of unsettled ambition, Wood had quit the army, studied law, founded a law firm in Portland, Oregon, made a fortune, and then switched from corporate law to civil liberties causes and labor law. He became a friend of Clarence Darrow, who introduced him to the youthful Sara Bard Field, wife of an Oakland Baptist minister. Wood fell madly in love with Sara, left his family and career in Portland, and induced her to divorce her husband. It was Portland's and the Bay Area's scandal of the postwar period.

Several years after meeting them, I drove up to visit the colonel and his lady at Los Gatos. Wood looked like a Sunday school-book version of God: he stood tall with a full white beard and a halo of white hair. After lunch he invited me to see his books, one of which was Garrick's second folio of Shakespeare. He handed it to me while I was holding

a glass of wine, and I hastened to set the glass on a table. But he stopped me. "Don't worry," he said. "If you should spill wine on this book, later collectors will say that it was done by Dr. Johnson or one of Garrick's other famous friends."

Gelber and Lilienthal ran a beautiful bookshop. Its shelves were loaded with first editions of Norman Douglas, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and their like, and an abundance of fine printing—all the way from Aldines to the newest productions of the Nonesuch Press, John Henry Nash, and the Grabhorn brothers. There I first met Albert Bender, the greatest patron and lover of books and printing San Francisco has ever had.

Bender was a little Jewish man with a lisp. He was born in Dublin, but he was San Francisco's best-loved and most popular citizen. To walk down the street with him was like a celebration; everybody from the shoeshine boys to the mayor knew him. He seemed to be the patron and friend of every writer, painter, printer, sculptor, and bookseller in town. He commissioned work by all of them, regardless of their prominence or obscurity.

Visitors to Albert Bender's home came away laden with broadsides and books, the ladies draped in kimonos and festooned with Chinese necklaces and other exotic baubles. There were many beautiful ladies among his admirers, but he remained an innocent, childlike bachelor all his life.

Bender loved to give, and his income—from an insurance business that had survived the 1906 earthquake, and paid every claim—was substantial. He played host to William Butler Yeats and Bertrand Russell. He supported the Irish poet Ella Young, who had moved to California, as well as an endless number of students and just plain freeloaders who never amounted to anything. He didn't care about returns; his largesse was the outpouring of a generous, exuberant heart.

*Linocut of Jake Zeitlin
by Paul Landacre, 1931
(Reduced)*



His philanthropy was not just personal. Bender founded collections at Mills College, the San Francisco Museum (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), the San Francisco Public Library, Stanford University, and the University of Dublin. Albert Bender found satisfaction in San Francisco. Only once did he venture to Los Angeles, where Idwal Jones—then a Hollywood publicist—and I entertained him. We liked to think that seeing us was a high spot of his trip, because Bender loathed Los Angeles and never came south again.

Also high on my list on that first visit was the Grabhorn Press, the fine printing firm that Edwin and Robert Grabhorn had been operating for about seven years. Ed Grabhorn, not long out of Indiana, stopped his press long enough to wipe his ink-stained hands, show me his collection of rare Californiana and prints, and answer an impatient customer with “What’s time to a hog?” He had unerring taste, and his brother Bob was equally discriminating in the collecting of early printing. Ed Grabhorn never fired anybody. He would just announce he was closing up shop, and then a month later he would open again with the staff he wanted to keep.

San Francisco in the late twenties and early thirties was a city of lights, ferryboat rides, taverns, and good eating places. I remember a tavern on Telegraph Hill I used to frequent with Idwal Jones, the Welsh-born writer who was working for the *San Francisco Examiner* in those days. We would meet Sam Farquhar (Samuel T. Farquhar, the first director of the University of California Press) and several Berkeley professors there. Prohibition gin flowed, and we would talk until dawn, telling great tales—some of them so good we gave them titles, like “The Whores of Tonopah” and “Woofy Ryan and Minnie Franzel.”

It was John Howell who welcomed me to his grand bookshop on my first trip to San Francisco. I was a ragged-cuffed, long-haired, scrawny young man, but he took me to the Bohemian Club and sat me down to fine linen and shining silver as if I were a visiting lord. There, in 1942, I met his son Warren, who became my friend and business associate for over forty years.

Warren was dynamic, inexhaustible, and inspiring. He ate, slept, and drank books with bookish people all his life. He was the great bookseller of the West Coast and became one of the most perceptive booksellers of the world. We traveled together to England, France, and Mexico; to New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Charlottesville. Without a scrap of paper to bind us, we bought whole libraries and collections together.

I remember a trip to Mexico—I think it was in 1955—when a Mexican businessman kept us cooling our heels in his waiting room for four days in a row. Each day at three o’clock, he would announce, “*Vamos a comer.*” After a bounteous meal and many libations, we would be too sleepy for anything but a siesta and a promise of “*Mañana.*” Finally, on the fifth day, he admitted us to a vast room of books, portfolios, and manuscripts and announced that we could have the entire collection for \$175,000. We did not have that much money nor could we borrow it.

He finally agreed to sell us \$45,000 worth of documents, including Eusebio Francisco Kino's autograph "Plan for the Californias," and a number of other California historic treasures. After concluding the deal, we asked what he would charge us for the balance in case we came back later. He said \$200,000. We asked how this could be when he had first asked for only \$175,000. He answered, "That was before I found out how much you would pay for what you bought."

For more than forty years Warren Howell and I talked on the telephone or met about twice a week. We dreamed up deals and exchanged stories. We described our triumphs and failures to each other. Then in January, 1984, I learned of his death. That day part of my life ended, too. But I could not bring myself to write a tribute or deliver a eulogy. Like some women faced with widowhood, I was angry; I could not forgive him for going out of my life. It was only when I found his telephone number disconnected that I was able to accept his death and make peace with his ghost. He was an important part of my life, and I am happy now to have the remembrance of those many years of friendship.

Two of the more colorful bookmen of the Bay Area wore academic garb as well. Dr. Herbert McLean Evans, a prodigious book collector, was head of the Institute for Experimental Biology at Berkeley; and Dr. Herbert Eugene Bolton, director of the Bancroft Library, was the great historian of the Spanish-American frontier.

Evans, a distinguished anatomist and embryologist, was the pioneer in assembling collections of books on the history of science. In all, he formed eight great collections, of which Warren and I sold five. The first went to the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton University, as a gift from that grand seigneur Lessing Rosenwald—a leading collector of rare books and prints who eventually left his collection of books and manuscripts to the Library of Congress and his prints and drawings to the National Gallery. Another is a large part of the Barchas Collection, recently dedicated at Stanford University. Parts of others became integrated with the Honeyman, Burndy, and Horblit collections at the University of Chicago.

Collecting books was an addiction with Evans. As soon as he sold one collection, he would set out to create a greater one. On one occasion, he swore to Warren and me that he would never collect again. At the next book fair, there he was, shamefacedly buying the finest copies and trying to avoid us; but finally he came up to us and admitted that the old vice had possessed him again. Child and genius that he was, Herbert Evans will live in memory for his book collecting as surely as for his discovery of vitamin E.

My first meeting with Dr. Herbert Bolton, in about 1936, was a singular experience. Maggs Brothers, the London booksellers, had written me that Dr. Bolton had failed to return a group of manuscripts he had taken from them some nine years before. Among these were the original manuscripts of Miguel Venegas's "History of California" (really written by Father Andrés Buriel) and seventy-five other documents and maps by

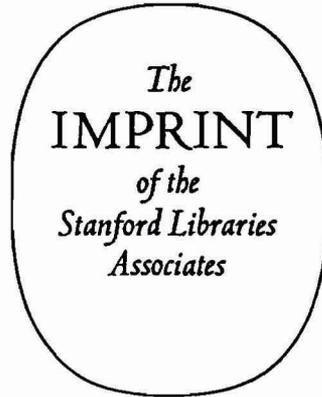
the early Franciscan explorers and mission builders of Lower and Upper California, including Father Fernando Consag's famous letter and map announcing, "*California no es Isla.*" "Dr. Bolton," Maggs claimed, "has ignored our request for return or payment. Will you please go up to Berkeley and reclaim these manuscripts and return them to us?" Maggs's client, from whom they had been on consignment, was justly pressing for payment or return.

I traveled up to Berkeley and called on the great scholar in his office. When I explained my mission, he leaned down, pulled an old trunk out from under his desk, opened it, and removed a bundle that did indeed contain the manuscripts. When he straightened up and looked into my face, I saw that his eyes were full of tears. What do you do with a man of over sixty who is crying? For a moment I was paralyzed. Then I said, "Dr. Bolton, if I get Maggs Brothers to let you have six months' more time, do you think you can raise the money?" His face lit up like sunshine after a rain. "I'm sure I can," he said and promised to return the manuscripts promptly if he failed to raise the money in time. Six months went by and he had neither raised the money nor returned the manuscripts. But three months later he found someone who would donate the treasures to the university, and Maggs received their overdue payment.

Bolton once told me of the visit of the famous Harvard historian Edward Channing, who consented to cross the Mississippi and the Great Plains to visit Berkeley and the Bancroft. This eminent pundit had written a history of colonial America without once mentioning the part Spain had played in its exploration and settlement. The two men got acquainted over breakfast and then Bolton led Channing into the main stacks of the Bancroft Library, where thousands of manuscripts and books lay still unsorted and uncatalogued. Bolton excused himself to go to President Robert Gordon Sproul's office for an important half-hour meeting and suggested that Channing might enjoy browsing through the collection during his wait. Upon Bolton's return, Channing said, "Bolton, I have sucked the lemon dry." Bolton's answer was, "Channing, you are some sucker."

The Bay Area has a history of dedicated bookmen and vigorous, imaginative book collecting. These fragments from my memory will, I hope, reaffirm that tradition and remind you, the present generation of book lovers, of your obligation and opportunity not only to cherish the sources of knowledge these men—Bender, Howell, Evans, Bolton, and their like—gathered so lovingly and joyously but to encourage the building of further great collections.

Los Angeles bookseller Jacob Zeitlin specializes in books on the history of science and medicine. He is also a connoisseur of fine printing and art. For many years his place of business—Zeitlin and Verbrugge—was on Sixth Street, then moved to Carondet Street near Wilshire Boulevard; it is now at the Red Barn on La Cienega Boulevard.



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FRONT COVER: *Design for Stage Scene, 1908.*

BACK COVER: "*The Actress Thespis*," 1937.

Both are woodcuts by Edward Craig.

See Thomas Price's article on p. 8.