**Book hunting in Covent Garden**

**by**

**An Autolycus of the Bookstalls**

As a long time book hunter of "unconsidered trifles" Autolycus regards himself an expert in this field. Although finds of grossly undervalued books are almost non-existent, the patient searcher can find some "good buys". The Covent Garden area presents one of the best hunting grounds for the booklover.

Cecil Court, of course, is the book hunters' Valhalla. In this lovely walkway between Charing Cross Road and St. Martins LAne, one can soak up the atmosphere of old books and old prints and forget about the hustle and bustle of modern London orchestrated by the jack-hammer and heavy machinery. The sight of good hearted book collectors bent over and craning their necks all along the stalls of the various bookshops is a delight to see. The scene is reminiscent of drawings by Cruikshank and Daumier. The sheer number of the bookshops (about fifteen) make this an excellent hunting ground. Prices are generally fair throughout all of these shops, though some of these shops' specialty is a bit narrow for Autolycus' taste. There are shops devoted to dance, children's books, homosexuality, music, and spiritualism. Although specializing is almost a necessity in the current second-hand book trade, shops that specialize in a particular point of view, such as spiritualism, left-wing politics, religion, or feminism, have little appeal as they are basically rooted in shallow soil. The outside stalls are usually the dumping ground of all the chaff, but an occasional grain of wheat may be found. Frognal Rare Books and Anglebooks often place some exceptional books priced low in their stalls.

One could rhapsodize endlessly about Cecil Court, but let us wander about the area to some other excellent shops. Before leaving the immediate vicinity though, it is well worth a trip to the parallel St Martins Court and The Green Knight Bookshop. The excellence of selection and fair prices make up for the rude and uncooperative young man who is usually in attendance. He seems to take pride in having no knowledge of any book whatsoever (saving perhaps the one he is irritated to look up from) whether in stock or not, nor does he attempt to know of any other bookshop even when he is asked for one around the corner in Cecil Court. But the books are excellent, and after all, most book hunters do want to be left alone. There is a particularly good section on foreign literature near the door, and a bookcase containing some beautiful out of the ordinary pocket editions.

Heading up toward Covent Market, one is confronted with a choice. Should one walk up New Row, the closest London comes to the élan of Paris, or through the narrow Goodwin Court, running parallel, where with your treasured books in hand you may peacefully remain in reveries of past days. Surely Goodwin Court, with its lovely bow windows, is the most intact and charming link with London's past. But if you're hungry, New Row is the obvious choice. Farmer Brown's is always delightful, if not for the sandwiches and coffee but for Paul and Billy's amusing chatter.

Continuing up King Street, the Market is the book hunters' next stop if it's Monday. For that is the only day of the week that two lovely ladies (who look like sisters) run their book stalls in the center of the Market. The other days of the week are limited to hand-made goods, though some exception should be made for bookstalls. The tradition of booksellers dealing from barrows is dying in London and is a great shame. Not only do they add greatly to the ambiance of a large city, but the personality of the bookseller and his prices are generally far more amenable than his shop-bound counterparts. Anyway, these ladies specialize in London topography (a lovely edition of Fletcher's sketches was seen there recently), children's books, and illustrated books. Prices are not cheap, but fair.

Let's continue our stroll past the maddening construction on James Street, to Flora Street, a delightful lane in past and present. To the left on Floral Street is Autolycus' favorite bookstore in the area, Bernard Stone. In character alone, this bookstore stands supreme. Any shop that uses an old cafe chair to hold a box of books outside is immediately inviting. There generally isn't much of interest outside, although a lovely little edition of *The Great Painters in Art and Life* was picked up for fifty pence. A small sacrifice even for impecunious Autolycus. The inside of the store is a delight. There is a large arrangement of unusual periodicals in front. The range and selection of books is excellent, especially the 20th century fiction and children's books. Please try not to make a fool of yourself (as Autolycus did) by talking to the elderly gentleman at the back of the store who resembles Sigmund Freud, for he is a wax figure.

Further down Floral Street are two more bookstore, Ian Shipley Books, and The Alternative Bookshop. Although the only alternative Autolycus can see is the alternative from balanced viewpoints. This is a good place to acquire some attitudes to bandy about with your discontented friends who find solace in socialist rhetoric. Ian Shipley has a large and comprehensive collection of art books. Nearly everything is "pricey" (as art books usually are). But there is a definite lack of any curious or unusual items, or any lower range of prices, where Jasper Morrison succeeds in his art bookstore, just off High Street Kensington.

Let's cut up Conduit Court, past some interesting galleries to Long Acre. At numbers 30-31 is the imposing yet beautiful facade of Bertram Rota. No unconsidered trifles here! Again, books are a bit pricey here, yet there is little of exceptional interest, and their stock rarely turns over. Also, despite the very nice demeanor of the people working there, they have the nasty habit of asking if "they may help you." Walter Mursell expressed my feelings in *Byways in Bookland* : "I have not the moral courage to tell them that I have not the least idea of what I want; that I have come there to find out what I want; that the only thing they can do for me is to let me alone." For after all, browsers become buyers, and buyers eventually become collectors. Despite the vast interior, there is something inspirational about the place, like a church, the religion being Bibliomania, and hence worthy of paying one's respects.

Now let us head up east on Long Acre to Bell Book and Radmall. Autolycus' rounds used to take him up Neal Street at this juncture to visit Skoob Books, now moved to the lovely pedestrian mall, Sicilian Avenue, off Southampton Street, in Holburn. But that is really not so far out of the way for the true book hunter, and only a five minute walk beyond Bell Book and Radmall. The old Skoob Books on Neal Street was a wretched sight from the outside, yet to Autolycus held a great deal of charm. The small cut-out door in the corrugated metal front was a bit intimidating, but the interior was a garden of delights. It had all the requisites of a second-hand bookstore: musty odors, a variety of styles of bookcases, creaking uneven wood floors, a staircase where one invariably bumped one's head, and low prices! Fortunately this latter quality still prevails at their pleasant new quarters.

By now, Autolycus usually has an armload of books and anyone else would have the sense to turn back and be content with the day's hunting. But do not falter now! Bell Book and Radmall may be our last stop, but their stock is the best. They specialize in 20th century first editions, and although the prices may be high, there is usually good reason. They undoubtedly have the finest collection of modern firsts in London, if not the country. (It often breaks Autoloycus' heart to see so many books he covets yet cannot afford.) Yet there are many affordable books in stock as low as a pound. There is the impression that each price is thought out and aptly applied. And the very kind and knowledgeable proprietors bear this impression out. The selection and depth in hard to find authors is marvelous. Better not to quibble about price when availability is the issue. They are especially good at hard to find American authors like Kerouac, Miller, B. Traven, McGuane, Harrison, and others.

Any day perusing the bookstores is a pleasant day. Perhaps strolling through Broad Court would hold your mood back to the Market where you might sit outside and examine your purchases. You might even catch yourself whistling from the joy of your newly acquired treasures.