

Confessions of a
BOOKSELLER

SHAUN BYTHELL

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PROFILE BOOKS

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He handled the books with the reverence of a minister opening the pulpit bible. I had polished the leather that morning till it gleamed like silk, and Mr Pumpherson's finger-tips rested upon it as if they were butterflies alighting on a choice flower. He seemed to purr with pleasure at the contact. The visitor adjusted his spectacles before he turned over the pages and one could see that Mr Pumpherson's delight was infectious.

Augustus Muir, *The Intimate Thoughts of John Baxter, Bookseller*
(Methuen & Co., London, 1942)

When Augustus Muir wrote his spoof diary of John Baxter, I wonder if he was truly aware that this is undoubtedly the best part of the second-hand book trade, and probably of book-collecting too: finding and handling something rare and important. I once had a two-volume set of Francis Grose's *Antiquities of Scotland*, which, to the person who bought it, was the most important book imaginable. Grose and Robert Burns met in 1789 and became friends. Grose asked Burns to write a supernatural tale to accompany an illustration of Auld Alloway Kirk in *Antiquities of Scotland*, which he was researching at the time, and thus was born perhaps Burns's finest poem, 'Tam o' Shanter'. Although it appeared in two other publications first, Grose's *Antiquities of Scotland* was the first book in which the poem appeared, and while it is not of enormous financial worth (the last set I had I sold for £340), it is an important book to devotees of Burns, in part owing to the fact that Burns might well never have written 'Tam o' Shanter' had it not been for Grose's commission. The customer to whom I sold my copy had travelled down from Ayr when he'd heard from one of his friends that we had a copy. It was only after he'd paid that he told me of the Robert Burns connection, and had he not, I would probably still be ignorant of the fact to this day. It is an irony of my position

that – although I’m surrounded by books every day – most of what I know about them is imparted by customers, the self-same customers whom my first instinct is to discourage from talking.

Muir’s description of the way Mr Pumpherston handles the book also resonates: people who deal with rare books regularly visibly handle them differently, making sure to support the boards when opening them so that the hinges don’t split, making sure that when the book is removed from the shelf there isn’t too much pressure on the headband. Once you’ve been around rare books for a while, you become acutely aware of people mishandling them.

The pleasure derived from handling books that have introduced something of cultural or scientific significance to the world is undeniably the greatest luxury that this business affords, and few other walks of life – if any – provide such a wealth of opportunity to indulge in this. This is why, every morning, getting out of bed is not in anticipation of a repetitive drudge but in expectation that I may have the chance to hold in my hands a copy of something that first brought to humanity an idea that changed the course of history, whether it be a 1791 copy of *The Rights of Man*, the 1887 English translation of *Das Kapital* or an early edition of Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. This is what it’s all about.

THURSDAY, 1 JANUARY

Online orders:

Orders found:

Closed for New Year’s Day.

After a lie-in, I cycled to my friend Callum’s for his annual New Year party at lunchtime. Left at about 3 p.m. to get back in daylight, lit the fire in the snug and began reading *Miss Lonelyhearts*, by Nathanael West, which had been suggested a couple of weeks ago by a customer who had bought several books that I had also read and enjoyed.

FRIDAY, 2 JANUARY

Online orders: Closed

Orders found:

Spent the morning tidying up, then went for a short walk along the beach at Rigg Bay in the wind and rain with Callum and his partner, Petra, just before dusk. Petra is Austrian, with twin girls who are about ten. She always seems in such a ridiculously happy/hippy mood that it's almost impossible to imagine how she manages it without the assistance of hallucinogenic drugs, but she's wildly eccentric too, so she fits into the human landscape of Wigtown perfectly. As I walked from the van to the shop, the geese were flying over Wigtown to overnight on the salt marsh at the foot of the hill on which the town sits. It's a sight and a sound that never fails to impress, as thousands of them form an almost perfect V-formation as they fly in the thickening darkness in the cold, damp midwinter.

SATURDAY, 3 JANUARY

Online orders: 10

Orders found: 10

Back to normal hours, after a week of opening at 10 a.m. rather than the usual 9 a.m. A grey day, but at least the wind and rain have gone. The end of the festive period is always marked by a sharp fall in the number of customers, but today that feeling of emptiness in the shop was ameliorated by the fact that the first customer was Jeff Mead. Jeff is the Church of Scotland minister for the nearby parish of Kirkinner, and his public persona is probably best summed up by my friend Finn, who once told me that 'Jeff is more comfortable doing funerals than weddings'. This, though, belies his true character, which is mischievous, witty and remarkably intelligent, with a formal theological education. He's close to retirement, and is a large, imposing man. Shortly after I'd bought the shop, back in 2001, he came in for a browse. I'd bought a life-size skeleton which

I'd planned to suspend from the ceiling (I have no idea why, but it's still there, playing a violin) and which I had temporarily placed sitting in one of the armchairs by the fire, with a copy of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* in its bony fingers. I heard a howl of laughter from the depths of the shop, and shortly afterwards Jeff appeared and announced, 'That's how I want to be found when my time comes.'

Telephone call at 11 a.m. from a woman in Ayr. She has books that she wants me to come and look at next week.

On the news this morning was a story about four men who have been abducted from a bookshop in Hong Kong for disseminating literature critical of the Chinese regime. Bookselling can be a perilous business, but mercifully only financially so in Wigtown.

Amazingly, I found all ten of today's orders, which is something of a miracle. Most of them were recently listed and came from the collection of a man who brought in four boxes just before Christmas.

My friend Mary, an antique dealer, brought in a box of fishing prints, and a stuffed badger, which I've put in the shop with a price tag of £100.

Callum and Petra appeared at lunchtime and asked if I was going to the whisky tasting at 4 p.m. in Beltie Books. I told them that I would see how busy the shop was. At 3.30 the shop had been quiet for an hour, and just as I was considering closing early and going to Andrew's whisky tasting, about a dozen people in their twenties and thirties came in. They all bought books.

Till Total £136.50

10 Customers

MONDAY, 5 JANUARY

Online orders: 7

Orders found: 7

Another grey day, and miraculously, another on which I managed to find all the orders.

Patrick from Historic Newspapers dropped in to pick up the pile of overseas orders that had accumulated over the Christmas period. Our domestic mail goes out via Royal Mail, but international orders are cheaper using the courier that Historic Newspapers has a contract with, so we piggy-back on that.

Petra dropped in to ask if she could start a belly-dancing class in the big room upstairs. I'm not sure what sort of uptake she'll have, but I told her that she's welcome to use the room on Friday mornings.

A customer asked for my business card, but I couldn't find one. It must be over a year since I was last asked for a business card. The idea seems charmingly old-fashioned in a world of hyper-connectivity. When I first bought the shop, customers – particularly other book dealers – would regularly leave them, but it just doesn't happen any more, much like the calling cards of Georgian and Victorian times.

A German couple in their fifties browsed for an hour. The woman bought a copy of David Cecil's biography of Jane Austen. As she was paying, she said, 'Very nice to meet you at last', which seemed a little odd until she explained that the reason they'd come to Wigtown was because she'd read my partner Anna's book, which is – in part – about Wigtown (and me). Shortly after they'd left, a man in an orange boiler suit who'd bought a copy of her *Three Things You Need to Know About Rockets* last week came back in and, inspired by Anna's references to *Moby Dick*, bought a copy of that too.

Tom came round to discuss the project that Anna devised – the Writers' House idea. She wants to set up a company to buy and convert a property on the square and run it as a creative space, with courses on writing, reading and art, in conjunction with Spring Fling (an arts festival in the area which happens every June). He wants to have a brainstorming meeting here in the shop and was looking for suggested names to invite, so I gave him a few. The meeting will be here in the big room where we host the Writers' Retreat during the festival. It's next Friday evening, and he's organised food and wine.

Till Total £87.50
13 Customers

TUESDAY, 6 JANUARY

Online orders: 3

Orders found: 3

All three orders today were for books about railways.

Yet another utterly foul day, though the rain abated in the afternoon. The winter so far seems to have been nothing but heavy rain, driven by strong winds. I don't think we've had a single frost.

In today's inbox:

From: xxxxxxxxxxxx

Subject: the world needs my book

Message Body:

id love to advertise my book with u.

I have written a book that ensures the person you find becomes your life partner, this also removes the need for lying, manipulation and game playing. prevents emotional damage and removes the risk to human life through suicide. by arming people with knowledge about personalities.

The first customer of the day was an elderly woman who wanted to use the shop's telephone to call her daughter-in-law, who had failed to pick her up from the doctor's. The second customer was a balding man with a ponytail who tutted at the price of every single book he picked up.

I found an old blackboard in the cellar and made a frame for it out of an old picture frame. It looks rather nice. I've decided to try to write something amusing on it every day, an endeavour that is doomed to failure as weeks – sometimes months – may pass before a witty thought enters my head. To make it simpler, I picked a quotation from Noel Coward, taken from a book called *Famous Last Words*: 'Goodnight my darlings, I'll see you tomorrow.'

My mother dropped round at about 4 p.m. and talked without interruption for half an hour. Topics covered were the Writers' House idea and a source of potential funding that she's found (she repeated this at least six times), her friends' friends who have a

castle in Deeside which is about to fall into the river because of the floods (repeated four times) and the tenants of The Open Book* who left the place in a bit of a mess ('despicable'). It wasn't the most recent occupants, two Spanish women, but another couple (repeated four times).

About twenty minutes after she'd left (with a breezy 'Must dash, goodbye lovey') I looked out of the window and saw her bashed-up VW badly parked in the bus stop, while she busily chatted to someone. When I closed the shop half an hour later she was still there, bending the ear of whoever had the good fortune to bump into her.

Till Total £125.49

11 Customers

WEDNESDAY, 7 JANUARY

Online orders: 1

Orders found: 0

Opened the curtains this morning to see the first sign of the sun in what feels like months.

I spent the first hour of the working day being slowly asphyxiated by a customer's perfume, which I can only assume was manufactured as a particularly unpleasant neurotoxin by a North Korean biochemist in a secret bunker. Kim Jong extremely ill.

Another order came in for a book from the railway room. These are always the hardest to find. Railway enthusiasts must not care much for order on their bookshelves.

A woman slightly older than me, I'd guess, came in around

* The Open Book was Anna's idea. Realising she couldn't be the only person who daydreamed about running their own bookshop, she persuaded my parents to buy a shop in the middle of Wigtown, which is run as an Airbnb which anyone can rent in order to experience running a bookshop for a week. It is booked solid for the next three years and attracts visitors from all over the world.

11 a.m. I vaguely recognised her, so when she came to pay for a pile of novels – all of which I'd read and enjoyed – I asked her why she seemed familiar. It turns out that she used to go to the same auction house in Dumfries that I occasionally attend, so we reminisced about all the various characters and questionable activity that inevitably seem to surround auctions. It then emerged that she has a tea room in Rockcliffe (about 35 miles away), so we moaned about customers, and particularly about running a business on your own, and one that people expect to be open when it suits them rather than when it suits you. We have a shared loathing of the tyranny of social obligation in rural communities. She hates having anything planned as much as I do, it appears. And she's just finished reading *Any Human Heart*, one of my favourite books.

I started sorting through the two remaining boxes from the deal before Christmas. Not good shop stock, but all barcoded and in pristine condition – perfect for FBA,* so I processed them and boxed them up ready for 'uplift'. Some surprisingly high prices for paperbacks, but that's the way things have gone since online selling – it is harder to predict the value of a book than it once was.

In the afternoon I had a massive row with a customer over whether Maigret was a fictional French detective (me) or a Belgian surrealist painter (them), after which I telephoned the woman in Ayr whose books I'm supposed to be looking at tomorrow to postpone. She sounded enormously relieved and clearly has yet to go through them and sort the books she wants to keep from those she wants to dispose of.

Till Total £65.49

3 Customers

* FBA (Fulfilled by Amazon) is a service Amazon provides where booksellers can store their stock in one of Amazon's warehouses (euphemistically named 'fulfilment centres'). When orders come in for the books, they will package and send them out to customers. Although it solves the problem of not having enough space for books in the shop – as with almost every service that Amazon provides to third-party sellers – it comes at a cost which always leaves you on the brink of wondering whether it is worthwhile. Inevitably their 'charges' will multiply and keep creeping up to the point at which your margin is so tight that it's almost suffocating. But not quite. Parasites prefer to keep their hosts alive.

THURSDAY, 8 JANUARY

Online orders: 3

Orders found: 2

Another sunny day. Two in a row feels like some sort of record, given the weather so far this winter. One of today's orders was for a book called *Minorities in the Arab World*, which will be shipped to a priest in Lebanon.

My mother appeared this afternoon and talked for about half an hour about the door knocker on The Open Book, which apparently has a film of white mould over it. Why this matters, or why she thinks that I need to know, baffles me. She disappeared for five minutes, then returned with Alicia, the Taiwanese woman who is running The Open Book for a week. We arranged to go to the pub for a pint after work. Alicia, it transpires, is not her real name, but she's chosen it because it's simpler while she's in Europe. She's studying in Spain at the moment, and decided that Wigtown would provide her with a welcome break from the warmth and fine food of Spain.

Till Total £42

3 Customers

FRIDAY, 9 JANUARY

Online orders: 5

Orders found: 5

Torrential rain once again. Nicky arrived fashionably late as always. Even her black ski suit couldn't repel the rain – she looked like an angry seal as she pushed the door shut against the wind and rain. Nicky is the sole remaining member of what was once a staff of two full-time and one part-time employees. She is a good friend, although our opinions differ wildly on many things. She

is a Jehovah's Witness. I am not religious. She's in her late forties, with two grown-up sons, and is endlessly entertaining. She's also devoted to the shop, and enormously capable. She considers me as an impediment to the success of the business, and consistently ignores my instructions, choosing instead to deal with things as though the shop was her own.

At 9.30 a.m. I put the space heater on in the big room and moved the stereo for Petra's belly-dancing class. I've agreed to let her use the big room above the shop which the elderly ladies use for their art class on Tuesdays. Astonishingly, two people turned up. Once the rhythmic thumping of the activity upstairs had begun, I took the mail to the post office (just across the road), where the counter was manned by William, whose disposition was pretty fairly matched by today's weather. He greeted me as he does everyone, by completely ignoring me and muttering about how much he despises Wigtown and almost everything about it.

At about 10.30, as Petra and her dancers were in full flow. Isabel (who takes care of the shop's finances once a week) came in to do the accounts, and as soon as she heard the banging she stopped in her tracks and looked horrified. When I explained that it was a dance class, and not an orgy, she was visibly relieved. She also offered to take the cash from the till to the bank for me, since I've been stuck alone in the shop for three weeks and unable to get there.

With all the rain, the leaking shop window is dripping incessantly onto the Christmas window display (which was a pretty dismal show at its best) and now looks like a dreary and damp winter flower arrangement.

Three wildfowlers came in. One of them spotted a large, framed Victorian print, *Fishing in Connemara* which was priced at £40, and said, 'I don't mean to be cheeky, but what's your best price on that?', so I told him that he could have it for £35. He bought it, and three Robin Ade signed prints which I'd bought from Mary, my antique dealer friend. Nobody has shown any interest in the stuffed badger that I also bought from her, sadly, other than children, who are fascinated by it.

In the evening I went to the pub with Alicia (Taiwan), Gina (New Zealand), Elouise (Australia) and Petra (Austria). I was the

only Scot at the table. They're all here working in various pubs and cafés.

Till Total £132.99

5 Customers

SATURDAY, 10 JANUARY

Online orders: 4

Orders found: 3

Cold, grey day. Nicky appeared at 9.08 a.m., blaming the weather for her late arrival. The rain came on again at 10 a.m. and the sound of water dripping into buckets in the shop window began its usual symphony.

As I was filling the log basket, I heard a frog croak in the pond – the first one I've heard since last autumn.

On the way to the post office, I spotted Eric, the Wigtown Buddhist, in his orange robes – a welcome splash of colour on an otherwise grey day. I'm not sure when he moved here, but Wigtown has absorbed him with the amiable indifference it shows to everyone, no matter how incongruous they may appear in a small rural Scottish town.

Nicky spent the day re-arranging things that didn't need to be re-arranged.

After lunch I took down the Christmas decorations from the window displays. The left-hand window was still full of little puddles in places.

Today's blackboard:

Avoid social interaction: always carry a book.

Very few customers today, and most of them left before lunch. A family appeared at 2 p.m., and I had high hopes that at least one of them would buy something, but they left after ten minutes, empty-handed. No more customers between then and closing.

Till Total £34.49

4 Customers

MONDAY, 12 JANUARY

Online orders: 10

Orders found: 10

Grey, cold day, but dry.

Pleasingly, I found all of the orders this morning. One of them was for a German-language copy of *Mein Kampf*, published when Hitler was still alive. Inside, it was inscribed and contained a postcard – lacking any knowledge of German, I have no idea what any of it means. Still, it sold for £90, to a customer in Germany.

Five customers by 10 a.m., and all bought books. One bought three of Sandy the tattooed pagan's walking sticks. He is one of just a handful of regular customers. He lives near Stranraer and claims to be the most tattooed man in Scotland. He's also a keen (and talented) stick-maker. We have a barter system whereby he gives me sticks in exchange for books, and I sell the sticks in the shop. Must get in touch with Sandy and tell him we need more.

As I was taking today's orders to the post office, William was emerging from its dark recesses for a cigarette. In an unprecedented display of politeness and decency he not only held the door open for me but went as far as to say 'Good morning, Shaun'. Either he's ill or I am.

Till Total £72.50

5 Customers