



## An Antiquarian Bookseller's Approach to Restoration and Period Style Bindings

by Bjarne Tokerud

**A**s a bookseller who caters to the tastes of sophisticated North American and European book collectors, my perspective on restoration and period-style bindings is anchored in buying and selling valuable books. Collectors who pay large sums for rare books believe these are to be enjoyed, handled, and read.

The most important lesson of my antiquarian bookselling career came about as a result of my third visit to William Hoffer's antiquarian bookshop in Vancouver's Gastown. I realized that there was something unusual about the books lining the shelves. My conversation with Hoffer went something like this:

"Bill, I have finally figured out why your bookshop is special."

He raised his dark eyebrows. "Why's that?"

"Firstly, almost all of your books are in fine

condition. The modern books have their dust wrappers intact, the older books seem nearly new. Secondly, where condition is only *good*, the item is so rare that any survival is to be treasured."

In his oft semi-biblical way, with a forefinger pointed to heaven, he almost shouted, "But, of course! That way there is nothing to complain about except the price!"

"Fine condition" and "accurate, pleasing period-style restorations and rebindings" became my mantras after that.

Hoffer, a controversial figure who could sandpaper your brain with his brusque manner, died in Victoria in 1997. Even his severest critics acknowledged Hoffer's erudition and mastery of rare books. Hoffer was one of the first North American booksellers to draw upon the bookbinding skills of Courtland

Alex McGuckin works on a finishing tool. PHOTO | ALEX MCGUCKIN



*Hill's Body of Gardening* – a binding by Alex McGuckin. Finishing tools made by Alex. PHOTOS | ALEX MCGUCKIN

Benson to achieve a standard of inventory comparable with long-established British and Continental booksellers.

One mark of a successful book restoration or convincing period-style binding is that, *à première vue*, it appears original. The binding seems to have travelled through time exempt from the

ravages of entropy, war, and indifferent handling.

A rare book in a masterfully restored binding or a faithful-to-the-period rebinding is an investment. It's also an object to be enjoyed daily like a treasured work of art. A great book in a great binding fires up the collector's imagination and brings with it a visual feast and pleasures tactile, aesthetic, and intellectual. Imprisoning a valuable book in a bank vault is anathema.

I rely on Courtland Benson of Victoria, BC and Alex McGuckin of Edmonton, Alberta to provide the high standard of fine bookbinding and restoration demanded by collectors of rare books. The work of either of these bookbinders guarantees a book's physical preservation, and its investment value. The guarantee is upheld by their use of fine leather and appropriate dyes, rigorous attention to finishing, and – most important of all – skillful tooling with appropriate tools, typefaces, and techniques. The cost of restoration or rebinding can be recovered, and perhaps a profit made, if the important rule of accurate, and pleasing period-style restoration is followed, and where achieving “fine condition” is the goal.

Alex or Courtland can resurrect a dilapidated bookbinding to the point where it seems like proof of reincarnation: the soul of the book has migrated to a new, convincing, period-style body. I've benefited greatly from looking over the shoulders of these bookbinders and have always received detailed answers to my probing questions. I'm interested only in exploring possibilities, not in stealing trade secrets. When they share a new technique, a new tool, or a new design, I mentally record the information for future reference.

The requisites for creating convincing period-style bindings include:

- gold finishing, using traditional albumen glair and 22-karat gold leaf (shellac-based glairs do not achieve the same effect);
- hand-sewn headbands in colours sympathetic to the period;
- Sellaset, alcohol-, and water-based leather dyes;
- handmade marbled endpapers, matched to those of any date, accurate to within a decade;
- toned endpapers, matched to the adjacent aged text block (instead, I often see bright white replacement endpapers placed next to soiled and age-toned text);
- optimal humidity and temperature in the work environment (challenges during long Canadian winters).

Alex and Courtland meet the expectations of sophisticated book collectors by achieving the careful marriage of up-to-date conservation techniques with historical accuracy. They undertake exhaustive examinations of “the book” as a whole and in its parts, including analysis of historical book structures. I've walked by Courtland's office at night and observed him bent over his work, wearing a jeweller's magnifying glass with head light, scrutinizing books in illustrated rare book catalogues, or photographs from his visits to antiquarian book fairs. He copies or traces book covers and spines to create templates for book designs. If he can't purchase the finishing tools required to duplicate designs, Courtland makes his own, or has them made to order. Courtland

recommends the illustrated rare book catalogues of London booksellers Maggs Bros. and Bernard Quaritch for the study of fine bindings.

In an email, I asked Alex about the challenges of finding appropriate finishing tools, and leathers. He pointed out that period-style finishing tools range from \$50 for a simple unit tool, to \$340 for a 40-piece set of hand letters, or \$350 for an elaborate decorative roll. Although there are businesses that will cut tools to detailed artwork, limitations include prohibitive costs and lengthy delays that leave book dealers waiting unhappily for their bindings. It would have been impossible to accumulate the tools necessary to execute four centuries of bookbinding design if Alex had not learned to cut his own. He makes 70% of his bookbinding tools with a Pantograph engraving machine, files, and gravers. “And yet, I still have to get rolls, fillets, and type from the UK suppliers, and on average I spend \$2,500-3,000 a year.” Alex says the best leathers, i.e., calf, Chieftain and oasis goat, and vellum, also come from the UK, as well as France and Germany.

I appreciate the fact that Alex and Courtland do not insist on preserving as much as possible of the original boards and spine if these are stained or fragmentary. Incorporating small binding fragments into an otherwise new binding can become an exercise in preserving ugly dilapidation. Time-consuming and costly documentation of a book’s damages, and subsequent repairs, may be appropriate in the institutional environment, but I haven’t met a collector yet who has asked Alex or Courtland for that level of detail. Collectors generally see such documentation as adding cost without adding value. In my opinion, if the bookbinder can preserve the original boards and spine, that should be the first approach, provided these are in good condition. Alex and Courtland believe in retaining the authentic look and feel of the book but aesthetic appeal is vital. An attempt to replicate an appropriate binding should be the next approach. This often entails a new period-style binding if restoration is not possible. The choice to restore or rebind a book is often based on the owner’s willingness to spend money.



Before and after treatment by Courtland Benson: *A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-Tartary, Together with the Kingdoms of Korea, and Tibet*, by Jean Baptiste Duhalde. Printed in 1738 and 1741.

When bookbinders do not have the materials or training to bring life back to old books, the result can be hideous. I’ve seen cheap black skiver labels, with gold foil lettering, applied on light tan or reverse calf bindings. I shudder at eighteenth century books “restored” with labels bearing late nineteenth or twentieth century typefaces. “Erratic” lettering is the hallmark of early bookbinding, and the inappropriate combination of typefaces from different periods results in culture clash.

My clients are usually delighted when artistic and historical discretion is encouraged. Unconsciously or not, I believe the goal of both Courtland Benson and Alex McGuckin is to achieve the finishing perfection of a Christian Kalthoeber binding. The passion with which two these bookbinders pursue and perfect their trade is inspiring. •

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