

John Aubrey, Farsighted Steward

Review of a new book about this colorful Englishman

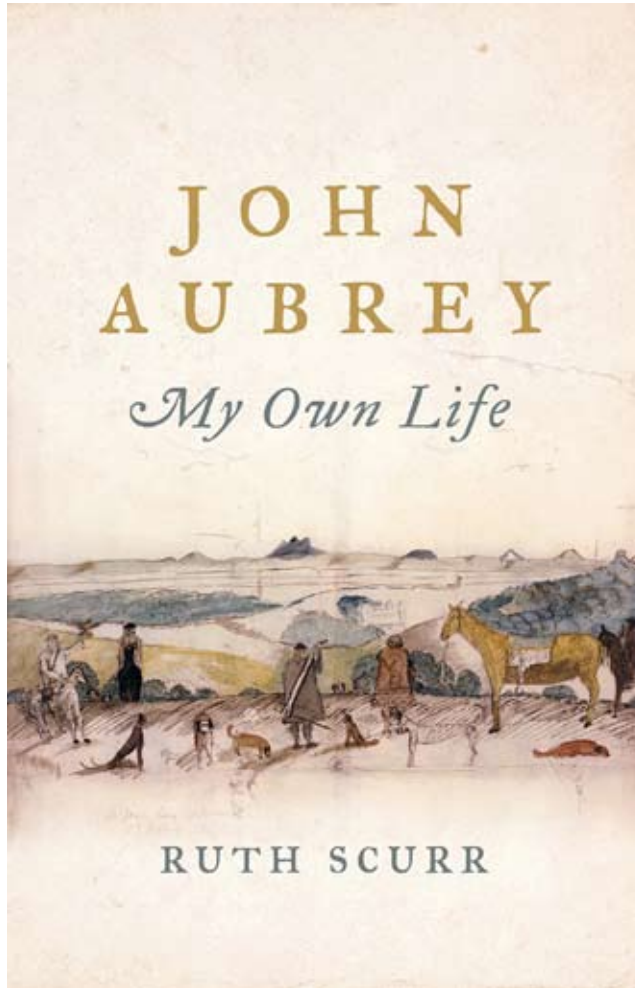
Matters of antiquity are like the light after sunset – clear at first – but by and by crepusculum – the twilight comes – then total darkness. –John Aubrey

Brenda Rossini

For modern antiquarians and lovers of the abstruse and obtuse (and why not?), author Ruth Scurr has conceived the life and violent times of a debt-ridden gentleman collector, antiquarian, illustrator, transcriber, surveyor, and conservationist in *John Aubrey, My Own Life*, interposed with excerpts from Aubrey's publications. Beyond peradventure, it is a delicious and erudite read.

Aubrey's own book, *Brief Lives*, a collection of biographical and historical scholarship and "full of drama and poignancy," is the source from which Scurr has cobbled this *parfait* journal of the 17th-century itinerant bookseller. His self-deprecating preface to *Brief Lives* suggests that it be "interposed as a sheet of waste paper only in the binding of a book," which was so inapposite of his life's vocation.

He was born in Dorset in 1626. From childhood, Aubrey was drawn to manuscripts, scrolls, and parchment collected within the hallowed halls of religious libraries – the last hurrah of England's monks. With his father, a sportsman and hunter, Aubrey also indulged in the outdoors. He was a peripatetic traveler, trudging the landscape on his quest to collect. His nature surveys and cataloging included plants, soils, cockleshells, springs, and even cattle. He remarked often on Dorset's precious flowers, particularly the ones that swept its meadows – cowslips, primroses, daffodils and gorse. Nor were turnips that grew on



England's green and pleasant land ignored. For Aubrey's instinct was to salvage – debris, paper, potsherds...whatever.

He recognized that the Sceptred Isle, surrounded by waters and beset with mists and mosses, compelled conservation. He made it his calling, and not just for the protection of manuscripts from nature's elements but from alternative uses such as pastry pan linings or as "toppers for the bungholes of ale barrels." His collection of essays on these archaeological, biological, and naturalist pursuits is contained in *Monumenta Britannica*.

Aubrey never forgets the locale where he

was born and where began his explorations – the monuments, historic houses, castles, and personages of Sherborne, Dorset. It is where today stands Sherborne Castle, an eponymous school, and where Thomas Hardy and the Powys brothers wrote of heather, farms, and fallen women in the 19th century.

Aubrey's grammar school education included Latin and Greek, dreaded memorization, and declension – which is the point, it has been written, where Shakespeare's education took a permanent pause – but from which nonetheless he emerged as a renowned poet and playwright. When Aubrey left the countryside for Oxford, he read classics and languages and cultures and religions and was engaged in manuscript research, transcription and collection at the Bodleian Library. 'Tis a puzzlement.

One of Aubrey's wealthy contemporaries, Elias Ashmole, would bequeath his superb collection (some of it grievously misbegotten) to Oxford. It is preserved at the museum named for him. Among other of Aubrey's lustrous colleagues

were Thomas Hobbes, Inigo Jones, John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Christopher Wren. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was prolific in all manner of prose besides Sherlock Holmes and stories of fairies and spiritualism. In his biography of Christopher Wren, Doyle cited John Aubrey, a fellow occultist, as a source. Both were tethered to the study of the dark arts, but as Aubrey's friend Hobbes wrote, life was "nasty, brutish and short."

The age in which Aubrey studied and survived was one of urgency and violence – a legacy left England by unhinged Henry

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JOHN AUBREY, from page 1

VIII: tumult between Protestants and Catholics and the Church of England versus the papists; the Civil Wars (1642-51); the public execution of King Charles I (1649); the ascension to power of the military in the person of Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector and dictator interruptus until 1658; the restoration of the monarchy in 1661 with Charles II; the disinterment of Cromwell's corpse and its grisly, posthumous execution on the gallows three years after his death; the brief reign of the Catholic James II from 1685; the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and James's overthrow; the uprooting of Catholicism and William of Orange, foreign but Protestant, assuming the English throne. The revolutions made England what it is today, beginning with nascent parliamentary government and a Bill of Rights intended primarily for Church of England countrymen.

Within this dynamic rose yet another revolution – in print and publishing. London was awash with booksellers and stationers. A paper products economy surged – pamphlets, religious and political tracts, manuscripts, and books were sold and auctioned at bookstalls, sheds, and shops. They littered the streets around St. Paul's and Paternoster Row, catering to neighboring printer-publishers whose scholars and scribes wrote their limpid prose and then spent their negligible proceeds at local hostleries. Paper was expensive. It wasn't manufactured in England until the 18th century, but importation and distribution was meet and good due to a burgeoning postal service. Funding could also be found with undertakers who had deep pockets, predictably, in the age of the Great Plague and deaths in daily

multiples.

In 1649, Aubrey was in the rabble witnessing the spectacle of Charles I's execution. About the king's remarks prior to his beheading, Aubrey reported: "On this day, King Charles was executed. It was bitter cold, so he wore two heavy shirts, lest he should shiver and seem afraid." When his severed head was held up for the crowd, many took swabs of his blood as relics or souvenirs. Aubrey, however, made no mention of having added a blood relic to his collection.

His studies at Oxford were interrupted not only by the debts he inherited at his father's death but by England's Civil War. During this time, Parliament also imposed censorship and book burnings (including those of famed poet, defender of King Charles's execution, and usurer John Milton) at universities. Aubrey left Oxford, and traveled to London for legal studies at the Middle Temple and a wider involvement in antiquities studies and preservation.

He also chronicled the private lives of various and sundry peoples – whether eminent or mendicant – in the calamitous years of the Great Plague, the Civil War, and the Great Fire. Today's besieged literary societies might commiserate. The literati were among the citizens who fled England, in the course of which neglecting to pay their membership dues to the Royal Society, which was left teetering on the brink. Aubrey, despite his own circumstances, remained penniless but stalwart.

During the course of his studies and travels, he toured monuments, cathedrals, archaeological sites, battlefields, and campsites. He collected plaques and translated inscriptions. He read manuscripts, filling

Stonehenge, depicted here in its timber phase, was one of John Aubrey's obsessions.



the margins with *quaere*, Latin queries, and annotations. He was fascinated with Roman artifacts, so he dug and discovered Roman coins and pottery. Had he not attended to these relics, Aubrey believed Rome's civilizing role in England's history would have been lost. Regarding another obsession of his, Stonehenge, Aubrey's efforts were finally recognized in 1920 when a circle of 56 chalk "holes" was named for him.

He wrote *Brief Lives* between 1680 and 1690, including in it a life of Shakespeare, but written with such brevity that one is left to wonder why he bothered. He did so, Aubrey wrote, because "our present writers reflect so much upon particular persons and coxcombicities, that twenty years hence they will not be understood." Shakespeare was first a butcher, like his father, a country schoolmaster in his younger years, and then an actor and gifted writer of dramatic poems and comedies – only one of which Aubrey cites, the 1597 "Mid-somernight Dreame." There is nothing whatever of the First Folio (published in 1623, seven years after the Bard's death) nor the history plays and tragedies.

Apparently, Shakespeare's background was a topic of discussion and inquiry. While at Oxford in 1642, Aubrey learned from a college acquaintance, Josias Howe, details that today would be labeled "hearsay on hearsay" and promptly ignored. Howe was from the parish



The beheading of Charles I in a contemporary German print

Grendon in Buckinghamshire, where ran a road one could take from Stratford-on-Avon to London along with Gypsy travelers on their commercial rounds. Howe was acquainted with a constable in Grendon, and the officer

informed him that he was the constable character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Grendon constable was alive and still spinning Shakespeare yarns in 1642. Not surprisingly, there is no mention of a constable in the play.

In our own day Wikipedia reported as fact that Shakespeare himself stayed at an inn in Grendon. This datum escaped the accounts of Howe, the Grendon constable, and Aubrey.

In the Scurr diary, Aubrey writes brief sketches of Ben Jonson. He does not acknowledge ever having met him. Aubrey's source was Izaak Walton's biography of Jonson, now held in the Bodleian collection. Ben Jonson, when he wasn't writing with distinctive brilliance, was an irascible pub habitué, where he found lusty stimulation and wrote the pawky lyrics to "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes." Aubrey was but 10 years old when Ben Jonson died in 1637 but from the recollections of Jonson's friends, Aubrey wrote as if he'd witnessed everything firsthand: "He would many times exceede in drink (Canarie was his beloved Liqueur)..." Jonson would also

See JOHN AUBREY, page 4

The Chandos portrait of Shakespeare, artist and authenticity unconfirmed. National Portrait Gallery, London, via Wikipedia.



emerge in modern times as a verifiable Shakespeare source.

The diary is also woman-centered: they were hunters like Aubrey's father, slatterns and wenches, litigious kooks, nurses, algebraists, luminous and fleshy mistresses, murderesses, witches, and great ladies. And there were drapers, aldermen, and Latin tutors. Marinated corpses, beheadings aplenty, and burial places designated for fanatics as well. There is unresolvable sickness: fevers, piles, scurvy, digestive attacks, hangovers, deafness, and blindness. And there were the stopped clocks – daily deaths from gangrene, venereal disease, gout, stroke, apoplexy, and consumption. It is all a titillating, coarse spectacle of 17th century

life in England.

We learn of the invention of the wind gun, the widespread use of glass in homes, and of curative diets: milk, buttermilk and balsam; white wine with ash; and remedies: boar's fat with a sprinkle of cumin. Some of Aubrey's more eccentric pursuits involved his assistance in the transfer of blood between chickens; traveling through Irish back country where the "natives scorned both industry and comforts," and preserving superstitions and witches' prognostications.

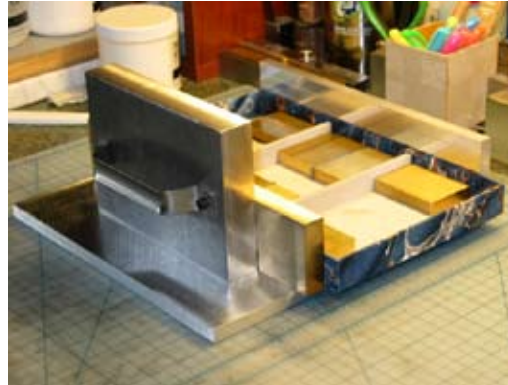
The law was also a pernicious ass. Aubrey himself was arrested for debts and plagued with lawsuits, one of which was for breach of promise. He never did marry, revealing in 1656 that he had venereal disease from perambula-

tions with strumpets. Mercifully, he chose the high ground and avoided marriage in fear of transferring his bedsickness to a wife. His proclivities thus led to concupiscence in the platonic ideal, as novelist John Gardner would imaginatively utter.

On June 7, 1697, John Aubrey died at Oxford, content that he had "rescued the past from the teeth of time." Oxford buried him in an unmarked plot, Aubrey having died a gentleman but a pauper. Discovery of the grave and its contents would be left to a future historical explorer.

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Ruth Scurr, *John Aubrey, My Own Life*, New York Review Books, 544 pages, published September 2016.



LOWER PHOTO, PAGE SIX: handmade bone folders. LEFT: brass font for foil stamping on cover material. ABOVE: handmade (metal!) bindery tools. RIGHT: wall of books in the entryway.

"He had incredible insights into collecting, both strategies for finding the best books and clues to understanding one's own motivation," Kobetsky says of Solomon. "He had everything, but he was constantly upgrading to better copies. If he bought a duplicate, he'd give me the lesser copy." It took Solomon's command for Kobetsky to buy his first truly expensive book: a copy of M.R. James's *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. It was \$650 and in beautiful condition. "I showed it to Doc, and he said 'Buy it.'"

The binding workshop mentioned above is another way in which Kobetsky is a special book collector. Early on he realized that he wanted to protect his favorite books with

boxes. But the prices for handsome custom boxes were often beyond what he was comfortable paying. So he tried making them, enlisting Caxtonian Scott Kellar for instruction. Gradually binding became an interest of his own.

Kobetsky's father is a mechanical engineer and skilled machinist, and the two of them share wonderful hours together solving bookbinding problems by coming up with improved tools. (Most traditional binding tools are of wood, or sometimes bone; only the cutting tools are metal. But metal tools remain true permanently, unlike wooden ones, which can warp. Metal tools also have the advantage of being heavy enough to hold themselves in place.) The diminutive "maid's" bedroom is now filled with the tools they have made. And Kobetsky has gone on to making

leather blank books for gifts. But never book repair! "People sometimes ask me to fix their cherished books," he says. "It's a whole different skill. I don't even repair my own."

But unlike some collectors, he does read his books – he's working through them systematically. He has 2,800 he currently counts as his "collection." He's read 1,100.

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Next month's *Caxtonian* will be guest edited by Susan Hanes.

CAXTON ON THE MOVE: Exploring the Political Cartoons of Art Young

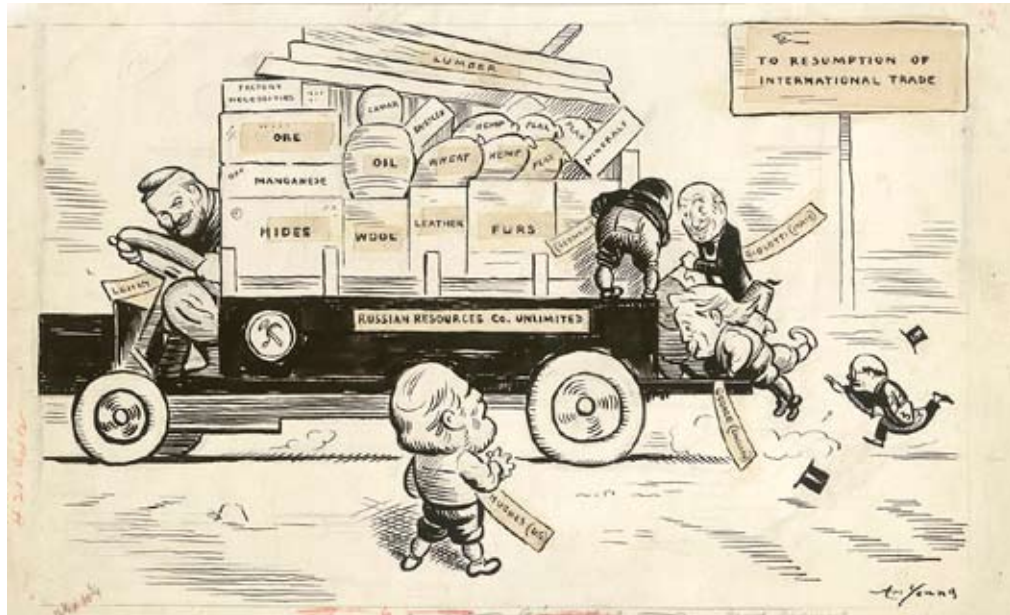
**Tuesday,
March 7**

Cudahy Library,
Loyola University,
1032 W. Sheridan
Road, Chicago

5-6 pm, Explore
exhibit

6:15 pm Special
presentations by
Caxtonians Valerie
Higgins, Anthony
Mourek and Loyola
Curator of Rare
Books Kathy Young

Reception for
Caxtonians and Loyola
Library hosts. Reception
(including heavy
appetizers and a bar) to
follow.



Art Young (1866-1943) was a prolific American political cartoonist most famous for his work for the radical socialist magazine *The Masses*. The exhibit spans Young's output from the early 1890s until 1942 and shows the transformation of his political positions and artistic style.

This special behind-the-scenes tour will provide an overview of the artist-illustrator's work as seen thru the eyes of both the collector (Mourek) and the curator (Higgins) as well as a chance to see the Special Collections of the Cudahy Library.

Price of this event: \$28. RSVP is required. Reservations must be received by March 5. E-mail jv.everydaydesign@rcn.com or call 312-266-8825 to reserve your spot!



Caxtonian
Anthony
Mourek

Book- and manuscript-related exhibitions: a selective list

Compiled by Lisa Pevtzow

(Note: on occasion an exhibit may be delayed or extended; it is always wise to call in advance of a visit.)

Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-443-3600:

“John Massey: Cartón de Venezuela” (set of posters for the Container Corporation of America’s subsidiary Cartón de Venezuela by Chicago graphic designer John Massey), through March 5. **“Deering, Palmer, Harding, Ryerson: Major Donors of Medieval and Renaissance Art”** (documents the acquisition of large private collections by the Deering family, the Palmer family, George F. Harding Jr., and Martin and Carrie Ryerson), Ryerson and Burnham libraries, through April 24.

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston, 847-491-4000: **“Mining Pictures: Stories from Above and Below Ground”** (features artworks and documents of mining and the complex networks of power, technology, and family and labor relations), through April 4.

Chicago Botanic Garden, Lenhardt Library, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, 847-835-8202: **“Orchidpalooza: Illustrated Orchid Varieties,”** through March 26. **“Botanical Charts: 19th Century Classroom Posters,”** March 31 to June 11.

Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington Street, Chicago, 312-744-6630: **“Stand Up for Landmarks! Protests, Posters & Pictures”** (images, artifacts, and ephemera relating to saving Chicago landmarks), ongoing.

Chicago History Museum, 1601 N. Clark Street, Chicago, 312-266-2077: **“Chicago Authored”** (works by writers that define the character of Chicago), ongoing.

Harold Washington Library Center, 400 S. State Street, Chicago, 312-747-4300: **“Called to the Challenge: The Legacy of Harold Washington”** (an overview of Washington’s life and projects as mayor), Harold Washington Exhibit Hall, ninth floor, ongoing.

Loyola University of Chicago Cudahy Library, 1032 W. Sheridan Road, Chicago, 773-508-2632: **“Art Young Cartoons from the Collection of Anthony J. Mourek”** (38 Art Young drawings, plus books, prints, and zinc plates from the collection of Caxtonian Anthony Mourek, including cartoon drawings from 1892 of then-mayor Carter Harrison, and of FDR from 1943), Donovan Reading Room, through March 31.

Newberry Library, 60 W. Walton Street, Chicago, 312-943-9090: **“Photographing Freetowns: African American Kentucky Through the Lens of Helen Balfour Morrison, 1935-1946”** (photographs documenting African American life in Depression-era Kentucky by the Chicago photographer), through April 15. **“Hamilton: The History Behind the Musical”** (first editions of Hamilton’s writings, original letters, and other materials that shed light on the many conflicting sides of Hamilton’s work and personality), through March 9.

Northwestern University Library, 1970 Campus Drive, Evanston, 847-491-7658: **“African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean: Culture, Resistance, and Survival”** (aspects of the history, culture and religion of people of African ancestry in the Americas and the Caribbean) Herskovits Library of African Studies, continuing. **“Hidden Treasures of Northwestern Libraries”** through March 18. **“Sounding the Archive: Echoes of Performance in the Distinctive Collections of Northwestern University Libraries”** (history of sound in nontraditional situations), Deering Library, third floor, through March 18.



Art Institute / John Massey posters

JOHN MASSEY. CARTÓN DE VENEZUELA POSTERS, 1964. GIFT OF JOHN MASSEY.



Pritzker Military Museum / Finding the Enemy

ENEMY PRISONERS, 1966. U.S. ARMY 25TH INFANTRY DETAINS VIET CONG PRISONERS ON THE CAMBODIAN BORDER. PHOTO BY SERGEANT FIRST CLASS ALFRED “BAT” BATUNGBACAL, U.S. ARMY

Pritzker Military Museum and Library, 104 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-374-9333: **“Hunting Charlie: Finding the Enemy in the Vietnam War”** (explores the U. S.’s opposition in the Vietnam War through rarely seen original art pieces), ongoing.

University of Chicago, Joseph Regenstein Library, 1100 E. 57th Street, Chicago, 773-702-8705: **“Concrete Poetry, Concrete Book: Artists’ Books in German-Speaking Space After 1945”** (explores how post-World War II artists in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland investigated the material and technical forms of the book), through March 17.

University of Chicago John Crerar Library, 5730 S. Ellis Avenue, Chicago, 773-702-7409: **“Harry Potter’s World: Renaissance Science, Magic and Medicine”** (explores the intersection of these subject areas, featuring highlights from the collections of the History of Medicine Division at the National Library of Medicine), through March 4.

Send your listings to Lisa Pevtzow at lisa.pevtzow@sbcglobal.net

Caxtonians Collect: Don Kobetsky

Interviewed by Robert McCamant

Behind the mild-mannered appearance of Don Kobetsky lurks a triple threat. He is not only a successful businessman and phenomenal book collector, but also an athlete! On weekdays he sets out from his North Lake Shore Drive apartment by bicycle, which he rides to Union Station and boards a train to Lisle carrying the bike with him. Once in Lisle, he gets back on the bike and rides to the offices of Aquilon Energy Services. The trip takes an hour and a half. On summer afternoons, he sometimes takes a bit longer and bikes all the way home from Lisle.

"I only drive to the office one day a year," he says. "The day we have the office Christmas party, I drive in the morning, then pick my wife up at the train station at the end of the workday, and we're able to return home together."

Someone else might have considered moving closer to Lisle, but a look around his and his wife's apartment reveals why they're so firmly anchored where they are. For one thing, there is the wall of books in the entryway. "It's only a couple of thousand books," he demurs. But they are very well organized. Furthermore, the room that was once a maid's bedroom is now his binding workshop.

Kobetsky grew up in Chicago's Edgebrook neighborhood. He attended Lane Tech High School, graduating in 1982. "It was a fantastic place," he says. "I took drafting for three years, shop for two, worked in a foundry, and even learned how cars work." That was on top of being a math major. He combined math with computer science at Loyola, then went to work for U.S. Steel in their computer department.

U.S. Steel began to decline, and

Kobetsky decided to jump to the computer department of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. He worked there 12 years, and



met at least two important people there: his wife Cheryl and the man who was to found Aquilon Energy Services, Jeffrey Wagner.

The company is a startup that is attempting to computerize financial dealings between power companies. (The way it works now, power companies send settlement invoices to other power companies once a month. If there are discrepancies, they send a spreadsheet with their transaction details to the counterparties. The counterparties review the spreadsheets, and they negotiate over transactions where their figures don't agree. Aquilon gets the companies to send it transaction information on a daily basis. They then attempt to match the transactions, as well as

keep track of and help solve disagreements.)

Kobetsky the book collector started gradually. He discovered the writings of H.P. Lovecraft and enjoyed reading them. Lovecraft's death in 1937 inspired two acolytes, August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, to form a publishing company, Arkam House, to print omnibus volumes of Lovecraft's writings and eventually of other writers of supernatural fiction. Kobetsky bought their first issue, *The Outsider and Others*. He loved both the content and the quality of the printing. Soon he embarked on acquiring everything Arkham published in its prime. (He achieved his goal only recently, with the purchase of *A Hornbook for Witches* at a Newberry Library book sale.)

An early influence in Kobetsky's collecting was the late Dr. Larry Solomon (interviewed in the January 2009 *Caxtonian*). For a long period, Solomon would buy dinner at Third Coast Cafe once a week for Don and Cheryl. After dinner, Cheryl would disappear to choir practice at First St. Paul's Lutheran Church and the men would go up to Solomon's apartment for what Cheryl referred to as book chat. See *CAXTONIANS COLLECT*, page 4





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Bookmarks...

Luncheon: Friday, March 10, Union League Club
Sarah Lindenbaum:
On the Trail of Frances Wolfreton

Enjoy a good detective story? How about a good English detective story? One that offers a captivating clue. Let's set it in a library, with a rare 17th century volume lying on the table, opened to reveal this: "frances wolfreton hor bouk." Oh, but let's go one better. Imagine that said volume is the only first edition copy of Shakespeare's poem "Venus and Adonis." What? A woman marked this copy as her book during the 1600's? Who was she? How large a library did she amass and what was in it? For the answer, join us for a fascinating and generously illustrated presentation by ace detective and rare book cataloger at the University of Illinois, Sarah Lindenbaum. She's been on Wolfreton's trail – painstakingly identifying the answers to those intriguing questions, and will share the results of fresh research that she has just brought back from across the pond.

March luncheon: Union League Club, 65 W. Jackson Boulevard. Luncheon buffet (main dining room on six) opens at 11:30 am; program (in a different room, to be announced) 12:30-1:30. Luncheon is \$32. Reservations or cancellations by noon Wednesday for Friday lunch. Call 312-255-3710 or e-mail caxtonclub@newberry.org .

Beyond March...

APRIL LUNCHEON

As is our custom, there will be no luncheon in April.

APRIL DINNER

April 19, Union League Club. Richard P. Minsky, founder of the Center for the Book Arts in New York, will discuss "American Decorated Publishers' Bindings."

MAY LUNCHEON

Dancing? No thanks. We'd prefer Reading With The Stars. Leonard Kniffel will reveal all – maybe even his ride through Paris with Olivia de Havilland. May 12 at Union League.

MAY DINNER

Adam Hooks, of the University of Iowa's English department, will talk about why and how Shakespeare's First Folio achieved its fetishized importance, and why we should continue to tell the stories of the other books that made Shakespeare. May 17 at Union League.

Dinner: Wednesday, March 15, Union League Club
**John Wilkin on "Beyond Caxton's Printing Press:
From the Short Title Catalogue to an Open Access
High Fidelity Collection of Early English Books"**

The early publishing history of Great Britain is the fertile ground upon which some of the most remarkable coordinated bibliographic work has flourished. Several individuals exhaustively cataloged and reproduced British literature from 1473-1700, producing a wonderful bibliography on microfilm and digital files. Wilkin will discuss the efforts of Wing, Pollard, and Redgrave in creating the Short Title Catalogue, the subsequent efforts creating the ESTC microfilm and Early English Books Online (EEBO) digital projects, and the Text Creation Partnership, a worldwide consortium of libraries creating a searchable full EEBO text. Wilkin will also briefly discuss the deficiencies of the current online images and ways access can continue to be improved. Wilkin is Interim Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Provost, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He joined the University in 2013 as Dean of Libraries and University Librarian after serving as executive director of the HathiTrust and Associate University Librarian for Publishing and Technology at the University of Michigan.

March Dinner: Union League Club, 65 West Jackson Blvd. The evening will follow this order: Social gathering, 5-6 pm; Program, 6 pm; Dinner immediately to follow. Drinks, \$7-\$10. Dinner, \$60. Program is free and open to the public. Reservations are required for either the program only or the dinner/program combination. Reservations must be received no later than NOON Monday, March 13. Dinner cancellations and no shows made after that time will require payment. To reserve call 312-255-3710 or e-mail caxtonclub@newberry.org.