

# *Bridging the Generation Gap*

SPENCER W. STUART sits down with Jim and James Cummins to hear how the firm is evolving to meet the needs of a new generation, both in-house and among collectors.

ON MADISON AVENUE between 62nd and 63rd streets, you will find James Cummins Bookseller. Perched seven floors above the revolving fashion storefronts, its presence (along with Ursus Books, Argosy Book Store, the Grolier Club, and a few others) is a remnant of the bibliophilic community that once called midtown Manhattan home. What's more, the firm's legacy is enriched by its intergenerational personnel in father, Jim Cummins, and son, James Cummins. A phenomenon once common to the trade, this practice is diminishing. As collecting practices transition and overhead costs balloon, it is difficult to capitalise on inventory while expanding into new collecting fields. In spite of these systemic pressures, the combined expertise of Jim and James, as well as the firm's other staff, have allowed them to remain agile and broad-ranging in what they offer to both private collectors and institutions. I sat down with both of them to discuss their distinctive paths into the profession and their thoughts on the firm's future.

Jim's involvement in the trade began in college when he took a position at the Williams Bookstore in Boston. At this time, he was pursuing a graduate degree under the tutelage of the pre-eminent Herman Melville scholar and book collector Harrison Hayford. Upon concluding his studies, Hayford advised Cummins he would likely make a better bookseller than a professor, insight Jim happened to agree with. The following year, he took a position at Brentano's managing its rare book departments. During that period, Brentano's had such departments within their various locations throughout the United States, including Washington, Los Angeles and Dallas. Cummins went on to manage these departments for five years before setting out on his own with his girlfriend, soon to be his wife and the mother of James, Carol Cummins.

The path he set out upon was not altogether

unfamiliar to Jim, however. At the age of 13, Jim was already collecting, winning a collector's prize in college for a Thomas Bird Mosher collection still in his possession. Indeed, Jim's brother, Harvard professor Thomas B.F. Cummins, also collected. They were both encouraged at a young age to do so by their parents. However, Jim Cummins' decision to enter the trade was not favoured by his risk-averse father, a surgeon. Despite this opposition, there were signs he was doing something right. During his first year in business in 1978, H.P. Kraus spent US\$1,200 on one of the collections Jim had on offer to buyers. It was one of his first big sales, at a time when his office rent was around US\$300 a month. He was just 32.

The trade environment into which James entered more than a decade ago was starkly different. Growing up at the firm's 'Mill' location in Pottersville, New York with his mother, James was involved in the trade at an early age, even having his own store within The Mill called The Everything Shop, where he would sell toys and other children's items. His father recounted an occasion when James was about seven years old and a partner from the Manhattan office of multinational investment bank, Morgan Stanley, arrived (in a limousine, no less). She proceeded to buy the entirety of The Everything Shop's inventory in cash (a sale totalling about US\$500).

It would not be until later that James would commit to the trade. Completing a degree in Art History and Business, he took a position at Maggs Bros in London, returning to New York after a year to join Bloomsbury around the time of the financial collapse in October 2008. It was a tumultuous time for the auction house, as they had rented a large space and had a highly specialised staff. Although there for only a year and half, James looked upon the period as yet another deep learning experience. Similarly to his time at

Maggs Bros, James was able to handle great material and forge collegial relationships that have lasted to this day. It was from there he joined his father's firm.

To be in a room with both father and son is to glimpse the business' past achievements and its future. With Jim having handled such career highlights as a Shakespeare First Folio, as well as a first edition of Edgar Allen Poe's *Tamerlane*, the shop has developed a reputation over the decades for providing quality material across a variety of subjects. James continues this tradition, recently offering a fine first edition copy of Darwin's *Origin of Species* as well as a superb first edition association copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* given to him by the man believed to have been the inspiration for the novel's eponymous character. The impressive list goes on and, indeed, will continue to grow. In order to stay competitive, given their broad approach, the firm continues to scout new fields of collecting. With an interest in diversifying their stock, James is considering books related to technology and computers as well as artificial intelligence. The increasing interest of LGBTQ+ material among

private collectors and institutions has had them working with such material in recent years as well.

In many ways, the firm has adapted to myriad transformative shifts the trade has witnessed over the past two decades. Having had a computer database since the mid 1980s, they have been ahead of the curve on comprehensive inventories, subsequently uploading them to online platforms. While online sales are significant enough to be an area of growth within their business, James maintains that quoting directly to collectors remains a major source of revenue. That said, being online has been integral to widening their client base. It is often the first point of contact for budding collectors. Moving forward, James thinks there's a great deal about the company that should remain the same. The foundation his father laid has established the firm as a trustworthy provider and active member of the international antiquarian book community.

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~ Spencer W. Stuart is vice-chair of the Alcuin Society and a collections management specialist based in Vancouver, British Columbia.



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*Three generations of the Cummins family Jim, James, and James' son—  
stand with the New York skyline as a backdrop.*