

Hard Times at the Grolier Club

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This year the Grolier Club celebrates its 125th birthday. The Club has been through a lot in that century and a quarter. With the United States at large, it has experienced two world wars; terrorist attacks at home and abroad; the assassination of three presidents; the waxing and waning of communications technologies from telephone to radio to TV to the Internet; the steady pendulum swing of national politics from right to left and back again; and, most germane to our purpose here today, it has weathered a long, long series of economic booms and busts.

The Grolier Club was born in the middle of what some economists have called the Long Depression, a series of more or less severe economic downturns lasting from 1873 to 1896. In the Grolier Club's founding year of 1884 the country was just climbing out of one of the deeper recessions of that era, but for Robert Hoe and the other eight founding members of the Grolier Club, the focus of concern was not the decline in prices and production, but the degraded state of the book in late nineteenth-century America, brought about by mechanized presses, machine-made papers, and a general slackening of standards in binding, typography, and illustration. The Grolier Club was founded to reform the book arts in America, a task it began to pursue immediately through exhibitions, publications, and the establishment of a library on the art and history of the book; and in its early years, at least, the fledgling organization pursued this mission apparently heedless of what was going on in the US economy at large.

This was true for nearly twenty years, during which time the Club expanded from nine members to over 350, designed and constructed its own clubhouse, published nearly one hundred books, mounted more than one hundred exhibitions, and built a library of almost 10,000 volumes. By 1915 the outlook was not so rosy, but the Club's problems were primarily internal and philosophical, and had little or nothing to do with the Panic of 1910/1911, or the Recession of 1913/1914. Membership was at a standstill; the Grolier Clubhouse, only twenty-five years old, was outdated and inadequate, and publications sales, on which the Club's financial health depended, were declining. In fact, the Grolier Club at this period was a victim of its own success. Having spent the previous twenty years educating its members and the public about the book beautiful, these ungrateful populations had gone off to produce beautiful books of their own. The Grolier Club was no longer the lone, revolutionary advocate for fine printing it had been in the 1880s. Now it had competition in the form of sophisticated commercial presses like Riverside, not to mention American fine presses on the European model, such as Grabhorn.

Accordingly, beginning in the 1920s the Grolier Club reinvented itself as an organization focusing less on printing reform, and more on collecting and

bibliophily. It became, in short, more of a gentleman's club. This was helped along by the construction in 1917 of a new and much more commodious clubhouse—our current building. The Club was also buoyed by the tide of prosperity that began to rise in America after World War I, a tide which also lifted a number of the Club's more affluent members. The 1920s were a period of great activity in the Grolier Club, productive of great publications, innovative exhibitions, and impressive Library acquisitions; and in that decade membership grew more than twenty-five percent, from 422 members in 1920 to over 530 in 1929. Then, of course, came Black Monday, October 19, 1929, and even the Grolier Club, hitherto immune, it seemed, to the vagaries of the American economy, felt the bite. The story is told in the Club's annual *Yearbook*, and I think it is significant that those little volumes, formerly issued in hardcover, first begin to appear in wrappers beginning in 1931. From a high of 538 members in 1930, the membership fell drastically, to a low of 391 in 1935, a *decrease* of more than twenty-five percent. A concerted drive to attract new members in the late 1930s eventually stopped the hemorrhage, but not until the Club's seventy-fifth anniversary in 1959 did total membership—and associated revenue—creep back up to the 538 figure achieved in the late 1920s.

For unlike most of the rest of the country, the Grolier Club's Great Depression did not end with World War II and the economic expansion which followed. The Club had lost some of the youthful exuberance and sense of mission that had animated its first decades, and in the aftermath of the Depression and the turmoil of World War II, there was talk about dissolving the Grolier Club altogether. But the Club held on, and the decades from the 1930s to the 1980s, though difficult, were by no means barren. From the depths of the Depression in 1933, for instance, came perhaps the Grolier Club's finest book, *Fra Luca de Pacioli*, the classic survey of renaissance letterforms recreated in a stunning collaboration between Stanley Morison and Bruce Rogers; and in 1947, despite lingering wartime restrictions on paper and other materials, the Club felt empowered to issue *One Hundred Influential American Books Printed before 1900*, the latest entry in its famous series of "Grolier Hundred" volumes.

The 1950s, looking ahead to the Grolier Club's seventy-fifth anniversary in 1959, brought a series of important renovations to the Clubhouse, and the inauguration of new programs, as well as the establishment of an endowment created by antiquarian bookdealer Lathrop C. Harper, which is the foundation of the Club's current relative prosperity. The 1960s and 70s saw further major renovations to this building, as well as a growing number of visits to bibliophile sites in cities at home and abroad: the Club flexing its wings in an attempt, for the first time, to operate in fact as the national and even international organization it had long been in theory. The 1980s brought the Grolier Club's centenary, and with it the first inklings of what computerization and digitization might mean for the printed book. But although that early irritation or itch has now grown to challenge, even overthrow, the "world of books" many of us have known and loved, it has also, I think, contributed to the revitalization, even the resurrection

of the Grolier Club, allowing it to emerge largely unscathed from the excesses of more recent economic disasters such as the savings and loan crash of the late 1980s, the dot-com bust of 2000, and the sharp downturn following 9/11.

For as rival information technologies have grown, so has the very strong sense among Grolier Club members that the physical book is a crucially important part of our culture, and that to promote and celebrate the art and history of the book is no longer merely our mission, but in a real sense our crusade. The Grolier Club is by no means alone in that effort, but that it can take, and has taken, a leading role in this crusade is clear from our growth in the past decade, in membership, and in activities like this one. No wonder that at 125 years old, the Grolier Club feels feisty and productive, even combative.

In conclusion: In comparison with some organizations the Grolier Club is the merest child, but in terms of human lifespan a century and a quarter is a very respectable age indeed. One sometimes reads accounts of interviews with human centenarians, and the causes cited for their longevity have a certain similarity; I will be so bold as to apply these to the Grolier Club:

The long-lived are active: the Grolier Club has a very full dance card indeed, as our calendar of member and non-member events attests; and why else would we be so unwise as to invite 150 people to a conference coinciding with the opening of the United Nations General Assembly?

The healthy elderly maintain strong social networks: the Grolier Club has over 800 formal members worldwide and probably twice that many loyal visitors and fans, and I am happy to say that the number of both categories is growing with us.

Centenarians keep up with the modern world, and engage with it: in support of that one, allow me to send you to the Grolier Club's revamped website at www.grolierclub.org.

Finally: lively centenarians tend to have a strong core belief-system: well, the Grolier Club believes passionately that the book and graphic arts are too important a part of our shared culture to be ignored, or denigrated; and we believe that librarians, collectors, book artists and members of the book trade all have a role to play in challenging attempts to marginalize the artistic and historical value of the book as object.

Less radically, we believe that a century and a quarter of existence brings a certain philosophical perspective to the topic of hard times. There are hard times of the pocket-book and hard times of the soul, and the Grolier Club has weathered both in its 125 years. That we are still here is due in part to yet another attribute of the very old: we don't sweat the small stuff.