**Scribner’s Bookstore:**

**All the Good Horses**

*There's a certain slant of light,  
On winter afternoons,  
That oppresses, like the weight  
Of cathedral tunes.*Emily Dickinson

597 Fifth Avenue

New York City

January 22, 1989

By three o’clock in the afternoon on this winter’s day, such sunlight as there was in the canyons of Manhattan’s streets angled in sharply. If we had positioned ourselves on the southwest corner of Fifth Ave. and Forty-eighth St. and looked diagonally across the great avenue, we would have seen two evidences at once of a setting sun, one meteorological and one cultural. Glinting off the brass and gold painted details of the ironwork façade of Scribner’s Bookstore, the reflected sun seemed, for the moment, benign. But not for long. Tomorrow or one day very soon, perhaps within the week, Scribner’s would close its doors forever. Though the Scribner publishing company, in 1984 swallowed up by Macmillan – itself then swallowed up by Maxwell Communications – survived in 1989 as an imprint, its heyday was long gone. The bookstore would soon follow. The loss of such a literary landmark would strike some New Yorkers and booklovers farther afield as incomprehensible.

En route to Scribner’s in January 1989, we might have indulged ourselves in a shopping stroll on Fifth Ave. Just moments ago, perhaps a flaneur’s detour into Rockefeller Center to see the ice skaters or to enjoy a hot chocolate, alfresco. Or, seeking inspiration, we could have stepped inside St. Patrick’s Cathedral, just a block to the north of the bookshop, on the east side of Fifth Ave. The New York Public Library is only six blocks south: Always something literary doing there. Grand Central Station, the city’s nexus, stands two more blocks east of the library. Central Park begins at Fifty-ninth St., a few minutes straight uptown on Fifth Ave., and we might well have lunched there at The Plaza Hotel, facing the park, before meandering downtown toward Scribner’s. For a day on the town, or a break from a midtown office, or for shopping before going to the theater in the evening around Times Square, Scribner’s location at 597 5th Ave. was incontestably top notch -- solidly at the very epicenter of New York’s retail district.

Scribner’s “…was widely considered one of the best and most beautiful [bookstores] in the world. In 1982 the exterior of the 10-story Beaux-Arts building was designated a landmark by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission.” (McDowell 1989) The richly handsome bookstore occupied two-plus stories on street level while the publisher's Spartan corporate headquarters hummed away, above – magazine publishing, reference books, trade books, subscription sales, and more. The book publishing offices on the upper floors were austere to a fault ("bare white ceilings and walls; uncarpeted concrete floors; rolltop desks and bookcases…"). Scribner's was a "family business in the second generation...the most genteel and tradition encrusted of all the American publishing houses." (Berg 1978) 10

Scribner’s, the publishing company, had been one of the most distinguished and productive in the history of American letters. By 1989 the firm was 153 years old (ancient by American standards), and family had been at the helm for almost the entire run. Charles Scribner (the 1st) was a founder, at age 25, shortly after graduating from Princeton. In 1846, “… to start an independent publishing company was something of an innovation. Most of the established houses had either grown out of printing plants, following the noble tradition of the sixteenth-century Plantin Press in Antwerp, or were offshoots of retail book shops. On the one hand, a printer might venture into publishing to provide work for his press; on the other, a bookseller might become a part-time publisher to supply extra books to sell in his store.” (Scribner 1978)

In 1865 Charles Scribner and Company began its magazine publishing, parallel to books, and the circulation scope of the various Scribner’s periodicals, during the next 75 years, reaching out to children, women, literary enthusiasts and general readers, vastly expanded both the sources for new books and the audience for Scribner books. *Scribner’s Monthly*, “an illustrated magazine for the people,” attracted young American writers.

The subscription book department blossomed in the late 19th century, too. Scribner’s produced the first American edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and, later, complete works of Kipling, Stevenson, Henry James, and J. M. Barrie. The reference book program at Scribner’s was a national leader with the *Dictionary of American Biography* and the *Dictionary of American History*.

By 1877 the company name had morphed into what older Americans in the early 21st century can still recall as a distinguished publishing label: Charles Scribner’s Sons. In 1894 Scribner’s moved to the first of its two Fifth Ave. addresses, both of them buildings commissioned by the company and designed by the noted American Beaux-Arts architect Ernest Flagg, brother-in-law to Charles Scribner II. At Fifth and Twenty-first St., the building housed “…a magnificent bookstore, the prototype for the more famous store on Forty-eighth Street and Fifth Avenue.” (Scribner 1978) The 1894 building was home to the Scribner empire for nineteen years, a period of enormous growth.

1913: Moving again, up Fifth Ave. to the new and even larger Ernest Flagg building at Forty-eighth St. In this period, “Scribner had been fielding a whole new team of young editors, the most famous of whom was Maxwell Perkins….” (Scribner 1978) It was Perkins who championed F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, and many others who at first seemed to be gambles but later evolved into deeply respected and highly profitable writers.

Scott Berg, biographer of Perkins: "The Scribner Building (at 597 Fifth Avenue) was … of classical design, crowned with two obelisks and graced with stately pilasters.” (Berg 1978) The storefront made a dramatic statement, all iron and glass, two-stories tall with massive arched windows. Stuccoed medallions graced the facade – images of Benjamin Franklin, William Caxton, Johann Gutenberg, and Aldus Manutius (printers and type designers), reflecting Scribner’s awareness that without the ink-stained hands of the printer, there is no publishing. These men were demigods.

Stepping into Scribner’s Bookstore, we entered a luminous grand space (many commented that it seemed “flooded with daylight”) under large, arching plaster vaults and stunning light fixtures. Staircases wound sinuously upwards, on both sides, to a mezzanine or gallery level. At the rear of the store, on the gallery level, was a display area for rare books or special shows of illustrations drawn from books – the “event space.”

*The Dictionary of Literary Biography* gathers several awed observers’ comments from the early days of the store at 597 Fifth Ave. "[I]n point of beauty there is little doubt that the Scribner bookstore stands first in this country, and possibly in the whole world. It is a large slightly oblong room, lighted from both the front and rear. Its arched ceiling of a whitish stone is supported by pillars of the same substance. Its walls, broken by a gallery, are completely covered by a stock of handsomely bound books upon glass shelves. The entire front of the building -- that is, the first story of the building -- is in reality one great window, set in a metal framework of a graceful design, and faced with brass. Over the glass door, which forms a section of this great window, is the name Charles Scribner's Sons, in gold letters, and lower down the familiar emblem of the House -- the lighted lamp in the open book [the burning lamp of knowledge and curiosity], surrounded by a wreath.

“As you enter the store, and look directly through it beyond the counters and tables of quartered oak, you face a low handsome stairway, which leads up to a wide gallery, slightly below the level of the narrow gallery that runs around the store. This is a new feature in a bookstore -- an exhibition gallery for the display of groups of books…” related to some particular event.

“The spacious store is undivided by full partitions, so that the eye has full scope from one end to the other. The fittings are throughout in ash, with black walnut moldings, a combination of which while elegant gives a light and cheerful appearance to the whole interior. The chandeliers, which were made for this store, are very happy and the design of each arm bears a Roman lamp, which is the emblem of the firm, and appears on the title pages of their books, from whose mouth the gas jet issues.

“The pair of stairs at the side bring us to the magazine floor… and [a] reception hall with wool carpeting, furnished with comfortable waiting chairs, and adorned with a [large painting] -- Kass’s "the Amazon," made by the artist himself.... [T]he room is an admirable example of the rich and artistic…. [T]he walls are hung with William Morris's papers.

“Book buyers frequently compared the old Scribner bookstore, on lower Fifth Avenue, to a private library, and the effect of the new store gives this impression still more strongly; or perhaps the comparison to an extremely handsome small public library would be more apt.” (Delaney2, 1997 #2) 65-69

Given these decorative and architectural indulgences – none of which speak for American pragmatism – is it any wonder that John Hall Wheelock, who managed the store before becoming a Scribner’s editor, called the 597 Fifth Ave. bookshop “a Byzantine cathedral of books." (Berg 1978) 10 Architect Ernest Flagg (1857 -1947), of Brooklyn, studied in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, launching his career in 1891 back in New York. He had a strong interest in setting a style for his home city and eventually became president of the New York Society of Beaux-Arts Architects. Perhaps his four most lauded buildings are the Singer Building, New York City; the original (1894) Scribner Building; the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.; and the 597 Fifth Ave., “second” Scribner’s building (1913). But his reach extended to Annapolis, Connecticut, New Hampshire and more. (Wikipedia1 2009)

“Beaux-Arts” architecture often incorporated a flat roof; a raised first story; a “hierarchy of spaces,” from "noble spaces"—grand entrances and staircases—to utilitarian ones [Scribner’s had all of these]; arched windows [these dominate the storefront]; arched and pedimented doors [Scribner’s portal was topped by a distinct pediment]; symmetry [there were balancing bays, staircases, and galleries in Scribner’s]; sculpture (bas-relief panels, figural sculptures, sculptural groups), murals, mosaics, and other artwork, all themed to assert the building’s identity; classical architectural details such as balustrades, pilasters, and garlands [Scribner’s had a full measure in several decorative categories]. The Beaux-Arts style thrived up to WW I (Manhattan’s stunning examples include New York Public Library and Grand Central Station), but Modernism’s stern plainness brought it to an end after the war. {Wikipedia3, 2009 #15}

Architecture alone, of course, can never make a bookstore, and a great list of authors in a publisher’s catalog does not automatically translate into a fine bookstore, either. Scribner’s understood bookselling to be a profession of individualized service. Roger Burlingame, one of the great Scribner’s editors and publishers, is said to have passed on a story about a woman (overheard in the Scribner's Bookstore), saying, "I want a book for a man, thirty-four or thirty-five...." (Burlingame 1946) If this shopper’s empty-headedness stands at one end of a spectrum of needs, thousands of other Scribner’s regulars used the bookshop as their first choice for specifically targeted new books or rare books. Clerks and managers kept records about who liked what. In those days, evidently, no one worried about privacy issues in the area of recreational reading. The bookseller was ready to advise discreetly, and yet one could roam the aisles and galleries undisturbed here, too. It was a browser’s paradise.

The faithful, in 1989, held out hope that, somehow, Scribner’s would survive, and even some of the players in the real estate squeeze that brought the store to its humbling end had hopes as well – including Leonard Riggio, by then already the CEO of the soon-to-mushroom B. Dalton / Barnes & Noble bookstore chain. The Scribner family had some time ago lost control of their own company, falling victim to what became a common problem with family owned publishing operations – inadequate capitalization. The Scribner name, its few bookstores (there was a small Scribner’s chain, too), and the publishing list were dispersed among various new owners, with the Rizzoli bookstore chain taking an interest in the Fifth Ave. Scribner’s bookstore. Rizzoli itself, from an Italian firm, had another of New York’s most beautiful bookshops, generally specializing in illustrated books. It, too, eventually dissolved, but the Rizzoli shop on 57th street had, for many years and for many happy eyes, its own irresistible draw.

By 1989 Scribner’s Bookstore – the building – was in need of major repairs, well beyond the scope of what Scribner’s, the publisher, or even Macmillan could afford. Real estate developers saw an opportunity in this decline, and various machinations brought the Italian investors, and American partners, to the forefront. There was talk of turning the bookshop into a Benetton clothing store, after a heavy investment in building restoration. The New York City Landmarks Commission angled to protect the interior of the store. (Dunlap2 1989) Fearing their hands might be tied, the realtors and developers were ambivalent about such moves. Meanwhile, bookshop customers lamented the apparently inevitable outcome: Their cathedral of books would soon disappear, and the stucco medallions gracing the facade -- of Franklin, Caxton, Gutenberg, and Manutius -- would no longer reign here.

There were further financial twists to the plot, but the outcome remained certain. By September 1989, the Brentano’s bookstore chain (itself a victim of bankruptcies, store closings and reorganizations throughout its history) moved into the former Scribner’s space. Preservationists cried “Foul!” because they thought they had a commitment from the Benetton corporation that if a bookseller were to come in, it would be a full scale traditional bookseller, not a mass market discounter which is what Brentano’s had become. The preservationists believed Benetton would lease the Scribner’s space to Waterstone’s, an Anglo-Irish chain of distinguished bookstores looking to establish a foothold in the U.S. A hint of things to come: Barnes & Noble, the arch villain in book discounting, loomed across the street. Instead, Brentano’s won the game. (Scardino 1989) Then, there was more insult to add to the injury: Eventually Brentano’s at Scribner’s gave up the ghost, and the preservationists’ worst fears were realized. Benetton itself moved in: Reading for the ages gone, fashion for the moment here to stay. (NYT5 1997)

As though a tiny gesture could somehow reestablish a link with a distinguished bookselling past, Benetton made a deal with Rizzoli to stock a mere 300 titles on the lower level of the old Scribner’s Bookstore, installing a small café as well. Benetton said it was a way to pay homage to the literary history of the site. (NYT5 1997) It didn’t last. In January 1989, after 76 years, Scribner’s closed, and Barnes & Noble bought the bookstore business, never to revive the 5th Avenue store itself.

Some public places, however, take on significance greater than their apparent purpose: Think of Constitution Hall, in Philadelphia; the battlefield at Gettysburg; the stage at Carnegie Hall, in New York. Bookstores, of course, come and go, but some very few stand for “bookselling” itself. Scribner’s Bookstore, 597 Fifth Ave., glowing in the late afternoon sun of a fading winter’s day, was such a radiant place.

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