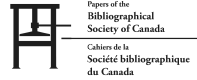


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G. Thomas Tanselle, *Books in My Life*, edited by David L. Vander Meulen (Charlottesville: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 2021), 367 pp, \$60.00 (cloth) ISBN 978-1-88363-121-5

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REVIEWS

G. Thomas Tanselle, *Books in My Life*, edited by David L. Vander Meulen (Charlottesville: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 2021), 367 pp, \$60.00 (cloth) ISBN 978-1-88363-121-5

Review by GEOFFREY ROBERT LITTLE
Concordia University

If you were a student in Sandra Alston's course, sadly no longer offered, in Analytical and Historical Bibliography at the University of Toronto during the 2006-07 academic year, you were provided with a syllabus wherein five of the fourteen weeks of the term had assigned readings authored by G. Thomas Tanselle. These included "A Description of Descriptive Bibliography" (1992), "Tolerances in Bibliographical Description" (1968), "The Bibliographical Concepts of Issue and State" (1975), and "A Sample Bibliographical Description with Commentary" (1987). It was easy to conclude that Tanselle occupied a very important place within bibliographical studies. As we learned, Tanselle combined a career in philanthropic administration, serving as vice-president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, with a robust scholarly practice as a bibliographer, book collector, and teacher at Columbia University, as well as at Rare Book School and Yale's Beinecke Library. After graduate school, my path crossed with Tanselle's during a short professional stint in New Haven, and I later invited him to contribute a foreword to a special issue of this journal that I edited on the history of electronic books.¹ Our contact has since been irregular but wholly cordial.

¹ Little, Geoffrey, ed. "What is the History of (Electronic) Books?" Special issue, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 51, no. 1 (2013).

For example, he very generously sent me a copy of his *American Publishing History: The Tanselle Collection*, published in 2020 by the Beinecke, to mark the gift of one of his collections to Yale, his undergraduate alma mater.

Edited by David Vander Meulen – professor of English at the University of Virginia and a distinguished bibliographer himself – *Books in My Life* is the tenth volume of Tanselle’s essays to appear under the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia’s imprint. Retired from the Guggenheim Foundation in 2006, Tanselle tells his reader that *Books in My Life* is both “an autobiography and a study of the rationale of and practice of book collecting” (iv). The volume begins with two previously published short autobiographical essays: “Books in My Life” (1999) and “The Pleasures of Being a Scholar-Collector” (2005). These are followed by a long essay, “The Living Room: A Memoir” (2008-09), a forty-five-part tour, in specific and exacting detail, of part of Tanselle’s New York apartment. What could be an otherwise boring description and enumeration of *stuff* is a well-paced, highly readable wandering through a space that is both well-used and well-loved.

A fellow accumulator, I read his living room memoir, a newly published essay in this collection, several times and slowly, enjoying the details, anecdotes, and stories associated with many of Tanselle’s possessions. Tanselle is not a confessional writer, but we get long glimpses of his childhood and teenage years in Indiana and his early career, as well as loving portraits of family and friends. He tells us about his great aunt Hazel with her interest in technocracy and her resemblance to the Duchess of Windsor; about his mother’s frustrated attempts over a number of years to have her fiction published by New York houses; about two other aunts, Mary, who taught both Bobby Short and Dick Van Dyck in high school, and Audra, who earned a diploma from the Sorbonne in 1924; about his partner’s passing acquaintance with Katherine Hepburn (Tanselle later acquired one of the actor’s desks at auction); and about bookstores in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles now long closed. We also learn that Tanselle’s apartment building has an underground garage and real plaster walls, that he prefers shutters to curtains, and that his full-

size blue velvet sofa is six feet eight inches long and was purchased at Macy's in 1978. Not surprisingly for a bibliographer, Tanselle is *very* precise and specific: "If we turn from the dining table to the north wall of the living room, just east of the foyer, we come first to a maple slant-front desk..." (91). This is but one example of exacting descriptions and placements, leading me to wonder if Tanselle has ever moved any of his possessions. The answer is likely a no: in his introduction, he tells the reader that he has acquired more books and a mantel clock since 2009, but otherwise little has changed (xi). This essay also includes meetings, encounters, or time spent with many of the giants of bibliography, book history, and librarianship, including names familiar to readers of this journal like Richard Landon and Patricia Lockhart Fleming, in addition to Terry Belanger, Mary Eccles, Don McKenzie, John Carter, Gordon Ray, and Nicholson Baker. We also learn that Fredson Bowers, not feeling well enough to deliver a paper in New York at a conference of the Society for Textual Scholarship, asked Tanselle to read it in his stead. As Tanselle tells it, "On April 11, the day of the paper, at about the time I was delivering it in New York, [Bowers] died in Charlottesville" (54).

The second half of the book contains additional previously published essays: "A Rationale of Collecting" (1998), followed by examinations of three kinds of books that Tanselle has collected himself over many years, namely non-first editions (1979), publishers' imprints (1970), and association copies (2011). These are all interesting and useful. "A Bibliographer's Creed" (2014) ends this half of the book and lays out Tanselle's tenets as a bibliographer. He reminds us of our obligations to collect, study, and preserve books and exhorts us to appreciate them better as artifacts that reveal much about the periods in which they were created. The Appendix, "Bibliographical Record," takes up eighty-five pages and concludes with a résumé, which the reader is told has been used over many years as a curriculum vitae. This last piece seems valedictory, for although Tanselle will celebrate his ninetieth birthday in 2024 (this gleaned from the résumé and the Library of Congress catalogue record in the book's front matter, which gives his year of birth), it can be hoped that his

contributions to bibliographical scholarship have not ceased entirely. The admirable index takes up thirty-four pages and is as thorough as could be wished.

In sum, *Books in My Life* is a testament to an important scholarly career and a life well lived in the republic of books, but it also advocates for the book as a physical object that reveals so much about our shared past, as well as the joy of acquiring, accumulating, organizing, and studying them.

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