



Roy Vernon Sowers: A Life in Rare Books

Roger Burford Mason

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Roy Vernon Sowers ("he neither used nor permitted any abbreviation of the name") was a legendary figure in the antiquarian book world—or, to be precise, worlds. A Canadian whose first shop, in the mid-1920s, was a Mecca for Toronto collectors and writers, Sowers later settled in southern California. There he dealt rarities to the emerging carriage trade and subsequently worked at the famous Huntington Library. Later still, he was a conspicuous book and print dealer at a succession of locations in San Francisco, where he patronized and promoted the fine-press movement.

Sowers, who died in 1970, spent his last years gathering books in Britain and Europe for resale through catalogues from his remote fruit farm in the Santa Cruz Mountains (where, because of the danger of fire, he kept his priceless inventory in an adobe structure that he designed and built himself).

His catalogues (he issued seventy-five in all) were notable for more than the often extraordinary books they described so knowledgeably, from modern first editions (in the early years of his career) to titles in medicine and the history of science (areas which Sowers helped make fashionable). His catalogues were themselves collected for the grumpy erudition of their introductory essays, pieces which grew more curmudgeonly as Sowers became increasingly disenchanted with the contemporary world.

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