

Memorial: William Gaunt (1928–2002)

¶1 William Gaunt, president and owner of the Gaunt Company in Holmes Beach, Florida, died on December 6, 2002, after a long fight with cancer. He was the last, with but one exception, of the law book salesmen who traveled the entire country, offering a large selection of new and secondhand law books.

¶2 Gaunt began his career with the Carswell Company out of Toronto after serving a hitch in the Royal Canadian Navy. He replaced William Hibbitt, who was the salesperson for Carswell in the United States for a long period of time. Hibbitt had traveled in this country when the only method of transportation was by rail, staying nearly eight months each year while visiting the country's major law libraries. He was noted for his beautiful penmanship in his written offerings to librarians. These salesmen were great friends of law librarians, bringing them greetings from friends in other parts of the country.

¶3 Gaunt followed in this tradition. His knowledge of English and Canadian law books was legendary. If a law library aspired to have a good collection of English or Canadian materials, a visit from Gaunt added to the librarian's knowledge of the important sources that would be needed. Reprinting was rare during the 1950s and '60s, and the only way to expand the collection was by purchasing secondhand books. Another benefit of his visit—as it had been with Hibbitt and the other traveling salesmen—was the rumors of possible job openings which he brought. Several current law librarians owe their jobs to such leads.

¶4 William Gaunt was born in Toronto, Canada, July 27, 1928. He went to work for Carswell in its Toronto office, overseeing shipping of orders and selling in Canada. Later he emerged from the home office to begin his career of selling books in the United States. He did this for a number of years before taking a position with the Hein Company for nearly two years. On my first encounter with this young book salesman during this period, I met a person who was cheerful, personable, and above all, not a pusher of his wares. He would explain what he had for sale and its importance to a collection. Conversations with him were rewarding for he had an encyclopedic knowledge of English and Canadian legal literature, the authors and historic English texts once valued highly as a part of the legal heritage of this country.

¶5 Eventually, the technology of printing advanced so that it became possible to reproduce existing books rather than having to reset the text in new type. This opened the door to the possibility that one day many libraries might be able to expand their collections to include titles and sets that previously were found only in long-established law libraries. Several companies that had sold secondhand law books began to take advantage of this new technology. Recognizing the opportunity the technology provided—now any law library could have the important English and American legal classics on its shelves—Gaunt purchased the Joseph

Mitchell Company of Philadelphia as a way of getting a foothold in the business. Over the years, the company he founded in the late 1950s to take advantage of this opportunity has reprinted many old and important legal texts. Perusing its latest catalog, which Bill Gaunt completed shortly before his death, will show just how successful he was in filling this niche.

¶6 Bill was a private person and rarely spoke of his personal life. He told others little of his illness in the years after learning he had cancer, and when he did speak of it, he was always upbeat and optimistic about his prognosis, although he knew the final outcome. Bill is survived by his wife Judy and four children by a previous marriage. His first wife, Mona, earlier died of cancer.

¶7 How does one say farewell to a friend after such a long acquaintanceship or adequately convey his lifetime contributions? None can replace the rewarding friendship that this association provided. Nor can a quotation from the past adequately sum up Bill's contributions to law librarians, for many English legal collections created in the waning decades of a previous century were due to the intrepid and convivial individuals he so ably represented. Unfortunately, their contributions to law librarianship will soon be forgotten, but Bill's memory will survive for some time to come.—*Erwin Surrency*¹

1. Professor of Law and Director of Law Library, Emeritus, University of Georgia Law School, Athens, Georgia.