House of Poesy: At the Grolier Poetry Book Shop

By Rhoda Feng
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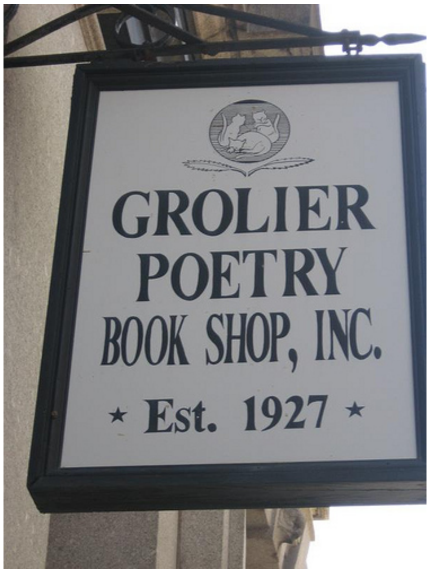


The Grolier Poetry Book Shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is both a misnomer and an anomaly. It has long dedicated itself to the task of promoting the reading and writing of poetry and has, for eighty-five years, served as a niche for poets the world over. While its reputation has bloomed over the years, thanks largely to word-of-mouth praise, it has never fared well financially, partly due to competition from larger stores and the Internet, partly because poetry has never been popular with the masses, and partly because its founder seems to have done everything in his power to ensure that his store not be turned into a business.

Located on Plympton Street in Harvard Square, the Grolier occupies just 404 square feet of space and is dwarfed by the neighboring Harvard Book Store. A white square sign with meticulous black lettering juts out near the top of the store entrance. The font size decreases from top to bottom, much like on an eye exam chart, and one can just make out, at the very top, a finely done illustration of three cats (or is it the same cat?) dozing, grooming, and turning their backs on the viewer.

Upon ascending a small flight of steps, one is greeted by the sight of an abundance of colorful spines—approximately fifteen thousand—neatly arranged against nearly every flat surface of the shop. These volumes are neatly balkanized into several categories, including anthologies, used, African-American, early English, Irish, Russian, Chinese, Iranian, Indian, Latin, classical Greek, Japanese, Korean, East European, Spanish, and Catalan.

Above the towering shelves are approximately seventy black and white photos (many courtesy of the photographer Elsa Dorfman) of poets and other members of the literati for whom the Grolier has served as a meeting place for well over half a century. Among the Grolier's most illustrious visitors, most of whom are smiling or gazing sagely and serenely ahead in the photos, are T. S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, e. e. cummings, Marianne Moore, James Tate, Donald Hall, and Helen Vendler.

Off to one side at the front of the store sits a lean shelf of chapbooks and a donation jar; a small note says that the chapbooks have been generously donated by the author and that monetary contributions to the shop would be greatly appreciated. Directly across this bookcase is the cash register, propped up on a desk and flanked by sundry items, including bookmarks, promotional literature, pamphlets, business cards, and commemorative pens. On the wall right adjacent to the register hangs a certificate from *Boston Magazine* honoring the Grolier as the best poetry store of 1994.

1927–1974: The Cairnie Years

Since it was founded in 1927, the Grolier has been a curious mixture of literary café, community library, and elite club for writers. One of the Grolier's cofounders, Gordon Cairnie, was similarly hard to pin down. A short and rather wizened gentleman with sparse white hair, puckered lips, and a questioning gaze behind rimless glasses, Gordon Cairnie, in his photos, often looks more like a professor emeritus than a truculent bookseller. But Cairnie would have been unsuited to teaching; he had a prejudice against female poets, was often described as "cantankerous," and could not abide ignoramuses who ambled into his store without a keen love for poetry. A sign on the door, which visitors in the past have found distasteful, made emphatically clear the owner's unwillingness to deal with people of decidedly unliterary tastes: "No law books, no text books, no science books. ONLY POETRY!" (Another sign read, "Close the damn door." Cairnie wanted to shut out the draft, but the message was susceptible to varying interpretations.)

Yet if someone ventured that he enjoyed reading Pound, Cairnie's patina of impatience would magically dissolve as he turned to regard the visitor with interest and proceeded to regale him with personal anecdotes of the poet—one of many with whom he carried on a correspondence. And to his closest and most illustrious clients, Cairnie was unswervingly kind and devoted. He would often loan them money, look after their infants, and give them free books as well as personal keys to the store. One such beneficiary of Cairnie's magnanimity was Allen Ginsberg, who would sneak into the store after all libraries in the Cambridge area had closed for the night and look up lines from the books on Cairnie's shelves.

Born in Coaticook, Quebec, Gordon Cairnie worked as a potato farmer before deciding to pursue graduate studies in landscape architecture. He enrolled in the Harvard School of Landscape Design, but soon discovered that he cared more about books than blueprints. So when he had amassed 2,800 volumes, he and a friend opened the Grolier Poetry Book Shop. The friend, Adrian Gambet, named the shop after the first librarian in Quebec, who also worked as a bookbinder. It was also his bid to attract wealthy clients; the store name, Gambet hoped, would remind such customers of an elite book club in New York of the same name. Not a year after its establishment, though, it became apparent to Cairnie that he and Gambet would have to go their separate ways. Gambet had started using the store for rendezvous with girls, and Cairnie found it increasingly difficult to put up with his friend's indiscretions. So he bought Gambet out and became the sole owner and proprietor of the store.

Gordon Cairnie at the Grolier on his birthday, 1968.
Dorfman

GORDON CAIRNIE, BY ELSA DORFMAN

When the Grolier first opened, it sold not just poetry, but also novels from Cairnie's and Gambet's personal libraries, books from independent presses, and avant-garde literature of all genres. It was the first store in Cambridge to carry copies of

Joyce's *Ulysses* (reputedly smuggled in by friends) and works by Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin. When Conrad Aiken moved into the residence above the Grolier in 1929, he befriended Cairnie and convinced the bookseller to stock more poetry. Its transition to a poetry shop was underway as was its identity as a regular gathering place for local poets.

Aiken became something of a fixture in the store and soon enough, he and his friends regularly sought out the shop's roomy, leather couch (to be replaced multiple times over the years), and stacks of disheveled books and print material. In the late afternoon or early evening (the shop was rarely open before noon), Cairnie would sympathize with one poet's frustration at having his work rejected, advise another about graduate schools, and converse with still others about publishers. Never one for fulsome blandishments, Cairnie was nonetheless always ready with some joke or drink to cheer up the dispirited.

One habitué, George Abbott White, recalled in his obituary on Cairnie years later, "He kept us in touch with laughter and gossip and endless introductions." At one time, Cairnie even granted an author working on a novel use of the shop's back room (now swallowed up by the Harvard Book Store). In his memoir, the novelist Jim Harrison embellishes the image of Cairnie the raconteur: he was "a rough and taciturn man but a capable though hesitant gossip, full of personal lore of every poet who passed through Cambridge." And John McKernan, who one day was asked to mind the store as its owner slipped out for an impromptu haircut, immortalized the Grolier's owner in his poem, "Winter Letter to Dan Marsteller from South Boston in January, 1975" in which he writes, "I came to Boston for the sea, / Gordon Cairnie, and the poet's life."

Cairnie frequently entertained established poets, but he also made time for students just embarking on their careers as writers or for those sans literary pretensions who nonetheless had a penchant for verse. He would often go to parties hosted by the *Harvard Advocate*, a student literary magazine, and took it upon himself to help international students from MIT and Harvard Business School acclimate to their new surroundings.

Its atmosphere of camaraderie notwithstanding, the Grolier did have its share of darker days. Gordon Cairnie's daughter, Jean Castles, who now lives in New Hampshire, spoke to me over the phone and informed me that her father's career as a bookseller was punctuated by a few terrifying incidents. When the police got whiff of news that Allen Ginsberg, a Beat poet with a reputation for participating in raucous readings, would be reading from his works at the Grolier, they came to interrogate its owner. Cairnie pleaded a heart condition, which was true enough, and fortunately, the officers let him off the hook.

Castles also recalls that “crime became more prevalent as he grew older.” Besides having to guard against shoplifting, which has continued to be a concern to the present day, Cairnie was occasionally the target of political extremists. “There was a pair of scissors on the brown couch and people would come in and grab the scissors and hold them to his neck and demanded to know if he liked black people,” Castles told me. “He would say some are nice and some aren’t so nice, just as some white people are nice and others aren’t. That seemed like a good answer to them so they painted a red pistol by the door. There were two or three incidents like this.” Cairnie refused to be cowed by figures of authority and anarchy alike. Indeed, the only time Cairnie contemplated selling the store and starting a life of retirement was when he was severely afflicted with foot trouble. He had one offer from a man who offered to buy the store for $600, but Cairnie turned him down, for reasons more of principle than profit: the man wanted to turn the Grolier into a porno book shop.

When he was not imbibing and kibitzing with poets, Cairnie could often be found writing letters and postcards to them. Many of these exchanges, preserved at Houghton Library at Harvard University, reveal a man who was on enviably intimate terms with some of the nation’s foremost poets. Cairnie had letters from Robert Bly with snapshots of his children, from Gerald Burns with new poems, and from Dorothy Shakespeare Pound requesting books for her husband and herself. In a letter of September 7, 1965, Robert Creeley asks Cairnie for a personal favor: his son had just graduated from the University of Colorado and wanted to pursue a career in writing, but was too shy to make use of his father’s connections, so “supposing you know of any interesting younger men thereabouts now, I’d be very grateful if you’d put him in touch with them.” Creeley had certainly thought to contact the right person; Donald Hall once identified Cairnie as the man who knew the most contemporary poets of the day.

There was also no shortage of encomia in the poets’ letters to Cairnie; Gerald Burns wrote in one, “you and your shop are a better influence on undergraduates than Sunday chapel and Harvard Square theater.” In a letter of December 19, 1963, Ursula Brumm reminisces from Berlin, “Who is coming to visit you and to sit on your sofa these days, Gordon? I feel that I very much need the inspiration which emanated from this place and hope to be able to use it before too long.”

The poet Conrad Aiken, writing in October 20, 1930, wryly informs Cairnie, “There is no bookshop in Rye [Sussex], except a stationers, where you can buy cheap reprints of Edgar Wallace; I recall with regret the many times when you so kindly loaned me whatever it was that I needed for a day or two. You were very good to me … but the situation here is so desperate that I even think of starting a bookshop myself.” And in another note of January 3, 1951, when business was presumably taking a turn for the worse, Aiken sought to uplift his long-time friend in a characteristically playful and lighthearted manner, “Don’t give up the ship, you’re a public benefactor and institution. Why not become a club, and we’ll all pay dues!”

Cairnie had never made money hand over fist from the Grolier, but this was not of great concern to him; he seems to have been fundamentally and constitutionally disinterested—some might even say to the point of being cavalier—in money matters. He habitually railed against publishers for charging him too-high prices, and chose to completely ignore, or conveniently lose track of, many bills, whereby he lost credit with many publishing houses. So what kept the Grolier from going under? The answer lies at the end of a poem composed by Donald Hall, which eulogized the man whom so many of the nation's most accomplished artists had turned to for support, advice, and a sense of community for half a century:

"Thanks
be to railroad stock," he liked to say.
His voice made a tune:
"Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe."

A trust fund, then, kindly bestowed upon Mrs. Cairnie, by an uncle in New York who made his money from railroad stock, was the talismanic source of Cairnie's good fortune. It enabled the store to stay afloat even if her husband should fail to sell books for months on end. Cairnie's business woes were no secret amongst his closest friends, as is made evident in his exchanges with them; in a letter of March 24, 1955, Sidney Corman jokes, "You know I ought to take over Grolier's from you—I have such a faculty also for being involved in what is economically unprofitable."

As it turned out, Cairnie would retain control of the store until his death in 1974. By that time, in spite of his financial setbacks, Cairnie had managed to become something of a legend in the literary world; for its autumn 1970 issue, the *Antioch Review* included thirty-six birthday poems dedicated to Cairnie from renowned Grolierites.

1974–2006: The Solano Years

LOUISA SOLANO, BY KEN S. KOTCH

Louisa Solano discovered her love of literature at an early age. Her father, Louis Solano, was a distinguished professor of romance languages at Harvard University and would often take his children to the Widener Library to roam among the stacks. At age fifteen, Louisa started working in the children's section of the Cambridge Public Library. One day, an older employee at the library invited her to come along for a visit to the Grolier Book Shop, and as soon as she stepped foot in the door, Solano sensed that she wanted to own a store just like this some day. Despite being somewhat intimidated by the gruff Cairnie, she made a habit of visiting the Grolier. After work, she would race over to the shop and do anything that needed doing, whether it was dusting shelves, sweeping the chronically creaky floor, or fetching coffee. Later, she took a job at Goodsped's, a rare books store, where she mastered the art of appraisal.

When Solano learned that, following Cairnie's death, the Grolier was up for sale, she set her heart on buying it. As she was strapped for cash, she reached out to friends and poetry lovers. Ultimately, fifteen of her and Cairnie's friends promised her $1,000 each toward a $15,000 loan, enabling Solano to realize her childhood dream. In an interview, Solano said that "it took me over ten years of owning the store to get any kind of confidence or raise my voice." She may have been something of a shrinking violet, but her actions spoke to her shrewd managerial instincts.

One of the first decisions Solano made upon assuming the helm of the Grolier was to throw away the moldering couch. In its place, behind the store's window, she installed a cash register. Solano was anxious to be rid of the cliquey and predominantly white male environment that she had found at times forbidding. Some poets shared her sentiment; during his first visit to the Grolier, James Tate couldn't summon up enough courage to introduce himself to Gordon Cairnie as the winner of the Yale Younger Poets prize. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky was similarly put off by the clubby atmosphere and he begrudged having to visit the shop in order to buy the books he wanted.

Solano wished to remain faithful to a large part of Cairnie's original vision of a bastion for poetry while simultaneously dispensing with a few of his more, unwittingly or no, exclusionary practices. She wanted to create a more egalitarian forum for poets of all genders, sexualities, and nationalities. As she put it years later to a reporter, "I conscientiously stocked poetry books by women, gay people, black people, and other minorities—people who were never represented in my predecessor's collection." It is impossible to imagine Cairnie receiving or responding to a query such as the following, penned by one Rondo Mieczkowski: "Do you know how to get books by the poet mystic Ramprasad? He's an Indian poet who writes to the goddess Kali."

To accommodate all her new acquisitions and reduce the clutter to allow for more foot traffic, Solano purchased taller shelves; the store went from having bookcases "slightly above shoulder-high" to ones that came close to kissing the ceiling. Unlike her predecessor, Solano was also eager to introduce all kinds of people to the joys of poetry. She would welcome construction workers into the store and sit down with individuals looking for the “perfect” book of poems to give a couple as a wedding present.

Another conscious decision, made in 1979, was to turn the Grolier into an all-poetry store. Such a decision may seem laughably impractical today, but in the seventies, there was a welter of poetry being published and small presses being established for just that purpose. Besides, poetry had always made up the true heart and soul of the Grolier anyway, so Solano’s decision would not exactly initiate a sea change. Her two great loves were Victorian literature and poetry, but as she once told a reporter, “I loved poetry more because it has always been the underdog and because poetry comes the closest to portraying the human soul.”

For Solano, who had neither trust fund nor financial support from a spouse (she was married and divorced twice), running a poetry bookstore proved to be a disillusioning and occasionally disheartening experience; she quickly became saddled with mountains of debt and books in low demand. To make ends meet, she subsisted on “peanut butter and rice and beans for five or six years.”

On top of the stress of running the store, Solano suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy and a few other health issues. But she didn’t let any of this deter her from attending to the larger part of her work. In 1976, she teamed up with the Blacksmith House Poetry Reading Series to start an annual poetry prize for an unpublished collection of ten poems. In 1983, the Ellen La Forge Memorial Poetry Foundation, Inc. was set up “to assume the public educational functions” of the Grolier. Solano became its first president and named loyal friends of the Grolier to the Foundation’s Board of Directors. The foundation ran a poetry contest each year “to encourage and recognize developing writers.” The prize has launched the professional careers of such writers as Linda Hull, Sylvia Moss, and Lucie Brock-Broido.

The idea for such a prize seems to have been partially conceived by the poet Donald Hall. In a July 10, 1983 letter he also suggested two other ideas that, though never implemented, strike one as entirely feasible: “I think that the book-reviewing of poetry is in a terrible state. What can we do about it? Well, we could offer a prize, the Grolier Prize for Poetry Reviewing, awarded annually to a reviewer who shows a combination of Disinterest and Passion in the reviewing of Contemporary Poetry, with a bit of Taste, As Well.” He went on to suggest that the Grolier start its own lecture series “whereby it invites a poet to deliver six (4?) lectures, over a period of two months say, on a subject of the poet’s own choosing, connected with poetry, and you pay the poet $10,000 for doing this … that would promote books, as a matter of fact. It would promote poets writing books about poetry. Hire old Bill Merwin, make him stand up on his feet and say something!”

In addition to overseeing work at the foundation, Solano found time to host autograph parties for her poet friends and even sponsored softball and basketball teams of writers, called the Grolier Rimes. Many friends remember that Solano acted as an “intermediary between writers and publishers.”

Ultimately, Solano was unable to hold on to the Grolier as long as Cairnie had. Despite the fact that her landlord, Harvard Real Estate, had been “lenient” about rent, Solano had continual difficulty making payments on time. In an interview, Solano cited terrible incidents of theft one year as a setback from which she found it difficult to recover. The business, in spite of all her efforts to create a more ethnically, economically and socially diverse clientele, never thrived: “I essentially have been supporting the store on my charge card for the past two or three years. I have no real money of my own. It came to the point when I had to pay, and I just couldn’t.”

Finally, in acknowledgement of her inability to cope with her own health concerns while managing the shop on a day-to-day basis, she announced that she would be selling the Grolier. In a memo, Solano wrote about what compelled her to seek a new owner for the store: “The decision to sell is not one I would have chosen except for the fact that for four months in the last twelve, I had enforced absences because of my health. This is no way to run a store: it creates the idea that the business is closed or that the owner has small interest in the customer. Rather than allow this to happen, I finally realized that my stewardship of the Grolier had come to a natural end. After 51 years of involvement (my ownership being 51), I have relinquished it.”

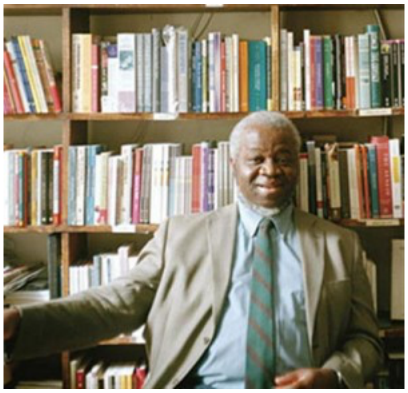
When news of Solano’s imminent departure became public, letters flowed in from loyal customer all over the world. In one, of March 31, 2004, Chris Wallace-Crabbe from the University of Melbourne Australia writes, “An institution like yours should somehow be immortal. And, more practically, where will budding poets now meet others? The loss of your ‘cave of making’ is so sad. Mass Ave. and its environs keep shrinking into yet another ‘retail district,’ another replica of Everywhere.”

For all the sadness that attended Solano’s decision to sell, there was cause to celebrate: shortly after Solano had publicized her decision, the corner of Bow and Plympton Streets was named in her honor in recognition of her contribution to the cultural life of Cambridge. In an e-mail to her friend Jim Henle, a writing professor at Harvard, she wrote that she felt “very happy” about the newly named Louisa Solano Square: “When you consider that almost five decades of my life have been spent in and around that corner, I can’t think of a better location. Being born in Cambridge, graduating from the public schools, and having a father on the faculty of Harvard, I feel that Plympton and Bow straddle the world of town and gown quite nicely.”

An unpublished poem by Eugene Grollmes titled “Louisa: At Grolier’s Book Shop, Harvard” makes the perfect caption for Solano’s plaque in Harvard Square:

She knows the changes of light,
Of dark. Where the poems lead.
The solitude. In which she walks.
Along trails – sometimes hardly
Visible. Yet trails – with turns,
With nuances – she would have
Us learn. If we but follow
Her. Beautiful. Brave. Exploring
World…after world…after world.
Where the poems lead. Louisa.

2006–present: Menkiti



The Grolier was sold in 2006 to Ifeanyi Menkiti, a professor of philosophy at Wellesley College, when it was about to declare bankruptcy. Menkiti, whose affiliation with the Grolier dates back to his days as a graduate student at Harvard, says, “As to buying the store, it was a labor of love. It was something that needed to be done to keep a historic place from going under. I knew nothing about retail … but I thought that there must be a way to put a team together and get the rescue mission accomplished.” Recouping losses and attracting new customers has not been easy, but Menkiti maintains a positive outlook on the future and contentedly says, “We are making progress.” There are only three people on the Grolier’s staff: Menkiti; his wife, Carol; and Elizabeth, in charge of acquisitions and the only one to draw a salary. Menkiti stops by Harvard Square every now and then, but most of the time, Elizabeth—whose primary duties involve making recommendations, checking inventory, and selling books—is the only staff person in the store.

The Grolier now has its own printing press, used to print volumes of works selected for the Grolier Discovery Award. Established just last year, the prize prints books of poems by new writers instead of bound volumes of works by an amalgamation of writers. As the Grolier prepares to celebrate its eighty-fifth anniversary this year, Menkiti is mainly intent upon ensuring the shop's survival into, ideally, the next century. To this end, he has established the Grolier Poetry Foundation, a nonprofit organization that depends largely upon donations from poetry and Grolier lovers. "If this can keep going until the next century, my job will have been done," Menkiti says.

Nigerian-born Menkiti is a tall man of comfortable girth who walks with a limp. Except for his gray hair, nothing about him suggests that he is seventy-two. On the day of our interview, he is dressed in a blue button-down shirt opened at the collar (it is a humid day and the antiquated air conditioner above the door is off and possibly inoperable) with two pens stuck in the pocket and gray trousers. When he speaks he has a habit of tilting his head to the right and gesticulating with broad palms; when pausing to collect his thoughts, he frequently closes his eyes for a few moments and upon reopening them, has a faraway glint.

One of the first things we talk about is the loyalty of customers from all over the world. Menkiti fondly recalls a Korean artist who made a vase for the store and a young man who wrote from Ghana asking to be sent books from the Grolier. He mentions a teenager coming into the store and sitting on the floor for hours, absorbed in a book. (Such behavior would likely have been looked upon less kindly by Louisa Solano, who noted that people spending inordinate amounts of time in the store were those most likely to shoplift.)

As soon as there's a break in our conversation, Menkiti rises from his chair and makes his way to the display table in the center of the room. He hands me a book, "Allforme poems" by Brian Sheridan, and explains that these poems were published after the author took his own life; the sister, Kelly Sheridan, shared Brian's poems with Menkiti, who agreed to edit and publish them.

Ifeanyi Menkiti first stepped foot into the Grolier in l969. "The famous couch was a distinct memory and Gordon Cairnie … who can forget his bemused demeanor, his often unsuccessful attempt to play the role of an irritated uncle who was mad at clueless Harvard students that stumbled in but could not tell the difference between a poetry book and a cookbook," Menkiti recalls. "Gordon actually liked people but he sometimes liked to present an irascible exterior."

Menkiti had come to Cambridge to study philosophy under John Rawls at Harvard. Before coming to Cambridge, he had studied philosophy and literature at Pomona College. Winning a prize for his undergraduate thesis on Pound, Menkiti says, reaffirmed his "faith in academic life." (In conversation, Menkiti will intermittently recite lines from Pound's *Cantos*; in a deep rumbling voice that sinks and rises in volume, he utters one stanza after another like an incantatory spell.) It was during his college days that Menkiti says he discovered the “nobility of poetry.” For him, poetry and philosophy share an aesthetic quality: just as poetry is the “gathering of words in harmony,” political order is about the achievement of an aesthetic harmony of a different sort.

Before the shop closes for the day, Menkiti hands me one of his own poetry books and tells me that the last poem in the book, “Before a Common Soil,” expresses his hope for the world; the following lines are especially pertinent: “I have called out to you, / children of an undivided earth, / That you join your hands together / And be of one accord before a common soil –.” To some, Menkiti’s vision of the Grolier and of the children of the future may seem a bit naïve, but Menkiti is quick to refute such a notion: “I’ve been in the trenches,” he states matter-of-factly and he refuses to be cowed by the financial difficulties that the Grolier has always been mired in.

Menkiti’s core belief is that the drive to make poetry or music is a timeless and perennial need; he mentions an archaeological discovery of punctured shinbones, which people long ago supposedly used to make music. Under Menkiti’s aegis, the Grolier hopes to transcend its status as a national literary landmark and embrace poetry from newer and farther reaches of the globe. At its core, though, it has remained relatively unchanged since its establishment eighty-five years ago as the place “where poetry is celebrated every day of the month.” Donald Hall’s statement, in a letter of May 15, 1998 to the Cambridge Historical Commission, still rings true: “In the US, there is no more significant poetic site than the Grolier: a gathering place, a focus, a center for the love and practice of poetry.”

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