



The art of the book; Life is a page-turner for historical bookbinder Alex McGuckin

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Alex McGuckin's basement is not your typical man cave.

Instead of a massive flatscreen TV, McGuckin has a massive paper guillotine.

Instead of beer bottles, he's got dainty square bottles of dye, ink and watercolour.

Instead of the sports section, he's got pages and pages of kaleidoscopic marbled paper, all handmade in Europe.

And instead of macho power tools, McGuckin has more than 1,000 handmade brass finishing tools: rolls, fillets, pallets, gouges and centre and corner tools, all neatly arranged on the walls of his atelier.

The historical bookbinder from Edmonton uses the tools to decorate book covers and spines with delicate gold leaf.

McGuckin's workspace is brightly lit, meticulously organized and intriguing, a repository of bookbinding materials and equipment that would make any creative soul salivate - without even factoring in the stacks of rare books that patiently await their makeover.

Over here, the skins of calf, goat and sheep, even reindeer and salmon. Over there, spools of specialty thread and cord: Irish linen, silk, polyester, hemp. Vices, presses, brushes. Cotton balls, scissors, solvent.

A little pot of egg white mixed with water, the albumen adhesive he uses to affix gold leaf onto leather with the humidity cranked up to 70 per cent.

"I love being in the atelier," McGuckin says. "I spent years tweaking and tinkering, making it just so. It's where I work, and I love my work."

If someone had asked a younger McGuckin, as he set off for the University of Cambridge in 1995, "Where do you think you'll be in 20 years?" McGuckin would have answered without the slightest hesitation: history professor, probably at some liberal arts college in New England.

Never, never would he have said, restoring valuable old books in his hometown. Yet life, as this bookbinder knows, is a page-turner: full of twists and turns and no knowing where or how it all will end.

"The genesis of my interest for binding comes from a very deep-seated passion for rare books," the 42-year-old says.

McGuckin was born in Edmonton on Remembrance Day 1971.

As a kid, he loved good movies, and that soon turned into a love of old books, not only as reading material but as beautiful, coveted objects. When he was 10, he watched Indiana Jones rifle through a huge old Bible with metal clasps in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. That same year, he saw *Chariots of Fire*, which is set at Cambridge.

"The architecture, scenes of dining in hall, the antiquated traditions, and the genteel nature of the place had a very strong appeal to me," he says. "I wanted to live in that world."

By the time he was 12, he had his heart set on studying at the famous English university. "I didn't know how, when, why or what," he recalls. But he did it. By the age of 23, after finishing a master's at the U of A, McGuckin was on his way to his dream school to pursue doctoral studies in Latin American history with a scholarship from Corpus Christi College.

"It was Cambridge and books, the accessibility, being able to buy them, being around book culture, it blew my mind," he recalls. "That place had everything to do with what happened."

By "what happened," he means the fact that his history prof dreams were upstaged by a new passion for repairing and restoring valuable old books.

Today, McGuckin is the go-to guy for all the restoration work at the University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Special Collections Library. He also does private commissions for collectors all over North America.

"He's a designer and craftsman of great originality," says Robert Desmarais, head librarian at the Peel. "Today, his bindings draw attention to and celebrate the bound book as a physical object of great beauty. His work shows imagination and good taste. Anyone who looks at his bindings - whether they're design bindings or restoration work - will see outstanding technical achievement."

McGuckin first tried his hand at bookbinding during his doctoral studies. He was in Mexico, doing field research at an archive, and became curious about the book restoration centre downstairs.

Under the wing of a man dubbed "el Químico" (the Chemist), McGuckin began learning the nuts and bolts of book and paper conservation: how to wash the pages, sew a binding and so on.

"The initial idea was to spend an afternoon, and I spent every morning of that one year in that restoration centre. It snowballed," he recalls.

When he got back to Cambridge, McGuckin joined a casual circle of "bookbinding nerds" (old profs, mostly). "I thought it would be a course but it was, like, 'Here's the machinery.' "

The more he practised, the better (and keener) McGuckin got. Then, in 2000, his father-in-law got ill, and McGuckin and his wife Colette moved back to Edmonton. McGuckin got a sessional job teaching history at the U of A, all the while labouring away on his book restoration projects, "an intensive, serious, obsessive hobby."

McGuckin thought he was set, teaching history, "moulding young minds," as he puts it with an mock-evil laugh.

But people kept asking him to do book restoration work. And the Peel library prodded him to take on bookbinding full-time; they had plenty of projects for him. His wife also pushed for him to take the career risk.

"I said 'no, that's madness!' " McGuckin recalls, but he eventually made the leap and hasn't looked back.

Most people have never met a historical bookbinder, and never heard of Alex McGuckin, but it's not only because the work is so specialized and uncommon. For many years, McGuckin preferred to hide out in his atelier, wary of self-promotion, unwilling to give interviews. When someone asks him, "What do you do for a living?" and he answers, "I'm a bookbinder," McGuckin is often met with a blank, confused expression. "It's 'I-don't-even-know-where-to-begin-with-this-where's-my-beer?'" he says.

But as the digital world began overtaking print, and people began to fear for the future of the physical book, the bookbinder decided it was his duty to champion the physical object he so cherishes.

"For a long time, I was happy to be in the dark," he says. "I realize now, I need to be an advocate for books."

McGuckin makes a good poster child for an antiquated craft. He is young (at least relative to what one might expect of those in his line of work), studious yet charming, wise and composed but with a streak of boyish excitability, talkative despite his bookish, homebody tendencies. And he's got a good knack for self-deprecation, poking fun at his fastidious, hyper-organized ways, his receding hairline and his alleged lack of social life resulting from too much time in the atelier.

Not even his Irish surname escapes a jab.

"McGuckin rhymes with puke'n, not f**k'n or gookin," he jokes.

Nine years after officially going into business, McGuckin has no shortage of work. He often has to turn projects away.

"Alex has no trouble securing commissions because of his reputation for excellence," Desmarais said. "There's nothing slipshod about anything he does. The man is a craftsman of considerable merit."

"He is MY bookbinder," says Jeff Moore, a lawyer who spent 20 years in Edmonton before moving to Vancouver Island in 2008. McGuckin has restored at least a dozen books for Moore, whose collection focuses on northwestern history, fur trade exploration and western Canadiana, as well as the craft of bookbinding, "and there are many (books) more on the go," he says.

Over the years, McGuckin and Moore have become friends. "I share that obsession, that desire for perfection," Moore says. "There are many who call themselves binders but it's a difficult craft, it's very demanding and unforgiving. It's one thing to bind a book, it's another thing to restore it and to reproduce the authentic binding and tools."

McGuckin's skills derive largely from one-on-one training with masters, notably Michael Wilcox, a reclusive bookbinding legend in Ontario. "In the circles that matter, Michael is a rock star," says McGuckin of his mentor. "He is without equal."

"There is nobody who touches Michael Wilcox," says Moore. "He's like an Emily Carr working in relative obscurity. He's a bookbinder's bookbinder."

The skills required of a period bookbinder now are far more demanding than in the past. Whether it was an independent 18th-century bindery employing a handful of people or a large-scale Victorian bookbinding firm, each worker had a specialty. Sewers (usually women) put the pages together, forwarders used boards and leather to make the covers and spine, then finishers made the book pretty with gold gilding. Today, McGuckin does each step himself, using authentic materials and techniques, and even makes his own finishing tools.

"This is very demanding work and Alex is capable of executing many decorative styles," says Desmarais.

Bookbinding continues to thrive as a craft and art form, with many focused on contemporary designer bookbinding. Mass-produced paperbacks of today aren't meant to last, but many publishers, especially small presses, are still mindful of creating books that will endure, from machine-sewn hardcovers with acid-free paper to bespoke editions using letterpress printing on handmade paper, illustrated by woodcut engravings or copper etchings.

"The desire for beautiful bindings hasn't changed from 100 years ago," Desmarais says. "Bindings reflect the ideas and wishes of their owners, and the skills, their makers. Those who appreciate fine bindings will want to furnish their homes with them."

As a period bookbinder, McGuckin makes it his goal to restore a book as authentically as possible. Sometimes he does simple repair work (water damage on a cover, pages torn or falling out). Other times, he's instructed to do a lavish restoration whilst remaining true to the bookbinding styles of the day. It all depends on the rarity of the book, its condition, the wishes of the owner and the price tag. "I have clients who will spare no expense to get the treasure they desire," he says.

Working on valuable one-of-a-kind books doesn't faze McGuckin. Recently, he did restoration work for the Peel on a slim volume of Jean Cocteau poems from 1917-1920 that Virginia Woolf bound herself. And he has worked on triple-decker copies of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* from the 19th century. Novels used to be published in parts, so *Emma*, for example, came out in three parts, hence triple-decker. "It's as close to Jane Austen as you're going to get."

What truly scares McGuckin is the Edmonton weather. Basements, after all, are known to flood in this city.

"I live in terror in the summer here. Every time there's one of our summer storms, I'm an absolute wreck. 'It will be a sleepless night! It will destroy my business!' " Desmarais considers it good fortune that McGuckin decided to set up shop here. "We are very lucky to have someone in our backyard to do this sort of work," Desmarais said. "Normally I'd have to fly out the books to New York or other cities who have bookbinders at this skill level."

He adds, "It gives me a measure of comfort knowing these treasures are at Alex's atelier. It's a safe place to be."

Private clients are equally grateful and loyal.

When Moore relocated to the West Coast, he didn't consider finding a replacement bookbinder. He hand-delivers his books to McGuckin's headquarters whenever he comes to town. (Other North American collectors ship their books to McGuckin by courier.)

"I gotta admit, there'd be a certain hesitation in going away from Alex, and not just because of the personal connection," Moore says. "It's because he does the forwarding and the finishing, and that's important. In my experience, a lot of binders don't give a damn about the binding. It's all about the esthetic, the book on the shelf. A book is meant to open up."

On the main floor of McGuckin's home is his "little refuge," a cramped, cosy room that serves as office and library with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

It is home to his personal collection. There are hundreds of rare books here, though far fewer than there used to be. McGuckin recently downsized, largely due to space constrictions, streamlining it to offer as many unique examples of bookbinding techniques and stylistic changes from the early 1500s until 1900. His library is more a museum representing the history of western European bookbinding esthetics, with any number of variations in leather, spine construction, bookplates, endpapers and gilding and metal ornamentation.

"Six months ago it was books upon books upon books. I realized, if I wanted to expand I'd have to be vicious."

McGuckin and his wife have two school-aged children, yet there is no "Do Not Enter" sign on the door of his library and the bookbinder happily invites in visitors (with their takeout coffee cups). Books aren't just information, they're a sensory experience.

In the study, he picks up a tome with a white vellum cover and strokes it. "You can see the pores. Sometimes you can see a few old hairs. So you're not detached. You realize, this is the skin of an animal."

McGuckin firmly believes books are meant to be touched, experienced. Their covers are meant to be opened and shut, their pages read and flipped (but not dog-eared or torn).

"The old adage is 'Don't judge a book by its cover.' Well, I'm all about judging a book by its cover," he says. "Sure, content is very important, there's no question, and the function of the binding is to protect the book.

"However, there's a real esthetic beauty, a tactile aspect that I find wondrous. For me, yes, you need to touch the book, you need to feel the weight, the level of craftsmanship that went into this thing. It's absolutely key."

In fact, the white-glove treatment has become outdated, even at special collections libraries like the Peel.

"If you were handling a book eight hours a day, sure the oils in your hands would do damage to the paper," says McGuckin, "but the amount of time that we do actually handle these books is so minimal that white gloves tend to do more damage, fumbling around flipping pages."

Still, he's a firm believer in literary longevity.

A well-made book is a work of art and a historical artifact that, if well cared for, should outlive many owners.

"Ultimately, we're just caretakers."