

WHITLAM'S

MAGIC TRICKS

CATALOGUE FREE

PUZZLES
JOKES &
BOOKS

JAPANESE
NOVELTIES &
MAKE-UP

WHITLAM AND DAVIES

Worlds of Wonder

JAPANESE NOVELTY STORE

WIZARD
TRICK



“MY SPECIAL TREASURES were *The Secrets of Stage Conjuring* by Robert-Houdin and *Modern Magic* and *Later Magic* by Professor Hoffmann; they had been banished as uninteresting — uninteresting! — and as soon as I saw them I knew that fate meant them for me.” — **ROBERTSON DAVIES, *Fifth Business***



his article is a brief tour of two worlds of wonder – the Robertson Davies Library and Joe Whitlam’s old magic shop in the Yonge Street Arcade. It is also the story of how an unexpected discovery of illustration blocks has recently united these worlds, bringing new life to both of them. Like the hand-printed keepsake in this issue, the tour begins in Toronto, travels through Chicago, and ends wherever you happen to be reading your copy of *Magicol*.

Robertson Davies’ most famous novel, *Fifth Business*, suggests that the celebrated author secretly wanted to be a famous magician. Early on, the protagonist of the story discovers three of magic’s classic texts, overlooked and forgotten in the closet of a small town’s library. This character, a teenager named Ramsay, loves magic and has ambitions to become the most famous and dexterous conjurer since Robert-Houdin. But an expert sleight-of-hand performer, he is not. Instead of becoming a great magician, Ramsay becomes an influential teacher and mentor for a younger character in the book: Paul Dempster. Paul later attains fame and fortune as the great Magnus Eisengrim – an illusionist of the highest calibre. Thinking about Ramsay, who loves magic yet becomes a writer instead of a performer, I can’t help but imagine that Davies is indirectly describing himself. I hear the voices of Val Ross, who wrote a biography on the man, and several others reminding me that though he was passionate about magic, his performances never went further than an occasional



Yonge Street Arcade

trick for a niece or a nephew. Instead of performing, Davies composed one of the best Canadian trilogies of literary fiction ever written with one of the most psychologically complex magician characters ever created. He also became a professor of literature at the University of Toronto and, in 1963, began an eighteen-year residence as the founding master of Massey College.

And it was in the depths of the prestigious, labyrinthine halls of Massey College where the legacy of Davies, the history of Joe Whitlam's shop, and several magicians interested in book history recently crossed paths so serendipitously. Having lived as a junior fellow at the College for three years, I knew that taking a left just before the Upper Library, descending the stairs to the Lower Library (remembering to touch the nose of the bust of Davies for good luck on the way down), and then spiralling to the left once more, led to the usually locked door of one of Massey's hidden gems: the Printing Press Room. I also knew that a few friends coming to Toronto to see Juan Tamariz, Max Maven, Mac King and Bob Sheets perform would enjoy seeing these late-nineteenth-century presses in action. Luckily, the day before these out-of-towners arrived, I found the door of the press room open and our affable printer, Brian Maloney, reorganizing the shop. Brian quickly agreed when I enquired about a tour, and then, just as I was turning to go, he asked: "By the way, did I ever show you those magic blocks?"

"Magic blocks?" I had no idea what he was talking about, but was immediately intrigued. So, Brian and I began a search of the press room's less-visited corners as he explained that Nicholas Fabian had donated them in 2004 along with a catalog. We couldn't find them, though Brian was convinced they were in there. One of Massey's librarians, PJ Macdougall, overheard our conversation and joined us as we began

the hunt again. We had checked every conceivable box, and began to fear the blocks had been transferred to storage or, worse, thrown out. Then, on the backmost shelf, in the back left corner of the room, Eureka!

There they were: nearly three hundred zinc and copper illustration plates along with two catalogs that customers of Joe Whitlam's magic shop in Toronto would have received in the early 1920s.

Even more exciting than this discovery of local magic history, was the opportunity to roll some ink onto the metal blocks the next day during Brian's tour and to hand press prints of them. Each magician chose an illustration or two to run through the 1870 New Improved Albion hand press (the workhorse of the Davies printing press collection). I remember that Gabe Fajuri chose the image of a Roterberg palming coin, which immediately linked this collection of Whitlam's catalog materials to Chicago.

Towards the end of his career, in 1916, August Roterberg sold his shop to Arthur Felsman who kept the business going in the Windy City. About three years later, according to Sid Lorraine who knew the shop well, Joe Whitlam made a deal with Felsman's and began issuing a version of his catalog. The majority of the blocks found were used to print advertisements sent out by Whitlam's Japanese Magic & Novelty Store: items such as "No. 143. The Electric Pack of Cards," "No. 124. Gypsy Witches' Fortune-Telling Cards," and "No. 613. The Coffee and Milk Trick."

As we kept printing different images, however, we realized that some of them were not advertisements. Some were visual explanations that would have accompanied typed instruction sheets given to customers who had been intrigued enough to buy one of the effects described. Examples of these included an image labelling the placement of the key ring for the Linking Rings, another showing how to escape from the "Siberian Transport Chain," and other visual revelations of secret methods that might have been early, prized possessions for a generation of Toronto magicians – performers who grew up in and out of Whitlam's shop. By the end of Brian's demonstration of the presses, all of us had given the New Improved Albion a few pulls to produce samples of the illustrations just described. There was something special about bringing back to printed reality these souvenirs from the retail magic scene of the early '20s.

For me, the Japanese Magic and Novelty Store is Whitlam's world of wonder. It was his life's work and went from being a mere novelty shop to playing a significant role in the Toronto magic community. Sid Lorraine, in an obituary for Joe Whitlam published in *Tops* (October 1939), states that in the shop's heyday it was "the home of all Canadian magic. It was in Joe's store that many of us youngsters first met the professional wizard". One of the defining characteristics of the place was its large storefront window stage, which would draw crowds. Lorraine saw this aspect of the shop as directly influencing the pantomimic performance style of Johnny Giordmaine, one of Whitlam's demonstrators. Other notable magicians who either worked at the shop or visited frequently enough to be considered part of its magic community were Ross Bertram, Bob Cook, Harry Gibbs, Harry Smith, James Randi, Norm Houghton,

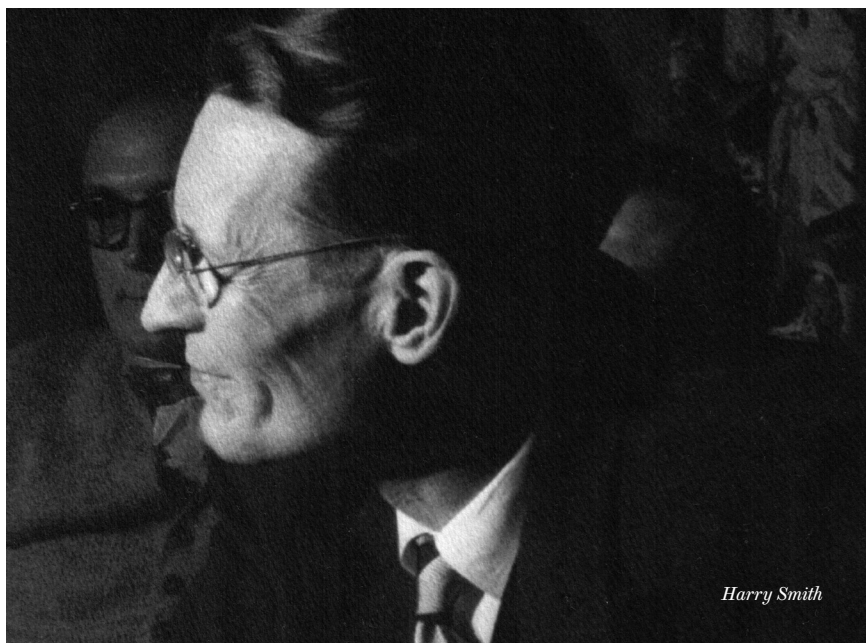
Howard Lyons, Doug Henning, Peter Isaacs, Tom Ransom, and many more.

The store went through several changes in name, ownership and location during its lifespan (1913 to 1979). After Joe Whitlam's passing in 1939, and shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Mrs. Whitlam changed the name of the store to a less exotic yet suddenly more popular one: the Arcade Magic & Novelty Store. Harry Smith, who had been coming into and working at the shop since he was quite young, took over the business in 1942 after Mrs. Whitlam's death. The store successfully survived this transition in ownership and business was generally steady until 1953. That year, however, a fire destroyed much of the old Yonge Street Arcade and the building was eventually demolished. The magic shop moved to 113½ Church Street, a location in which business declined for about eight years until the new Arcade building was constructed.

Finally, in 1962, the Arcade Magic & Novelty Store re-opened not too far from its original location (this time on the second floor of the building). According to Nicholas Fabian, this move ushered in another generation of magicians as well as new customers for the shop. Fabian was part of the community when this relocation took place, just a few years after his self-published article on the store mentions his first meeting with Harry Smith (in 1959). The youngster, who would become a professional typographer and amateur magician, saw Smith as his mentor and obviously cared deeply about the history of Whitlam's. Shortly before Mr. Smith's death in 1977 or perhaps just before the closing of the shop by Mrs. Smith in 1979, Fabian must have been given the blocks to hold onto. He, in turn, left them to Massey College only one year before his own passing in 2007. So, we have Fabian, his friend and fellow typographer Brian Maloney, and countless others before them to thank for first preserving and then remembering the enchanting illustrations found on the backmost shelf of the Davies Library where they had been seemingly banished as uninteresting – uninteresting! Well, the fortuitous rediscovery of those blocks certainly inspired my interest, this article and this tour of what was probably Toronto's first magic shop – one of its earliest worlds of wonder.

But what discovery or tour would be complete without some record of its occurrence? And what better way to celebrate the beauty of paper, ink, metal, and magic history than with hand-printed evidence?

As a tribute to Joe Whitlam's shop, to Robertson Davies' love of magic, and to the unanticipated intersection of their legacies, one of six hundred, individually numbered prints has been sent out to each of you as part of this issue of *Magicol*. Brian and I chose a 14pt American Garamond Bold from the Massey typeface collection to reference the font used in Whitlam's original catalog for item "No. 130. The Upton Rising Card Trick."† We settled on this particular image, because there is something satisfying about the texture of the artwork as expressed by the bite of the zinc plate into the paper. Take a moment to run your fingers over the broken and dotted lines explaining the motions of the pack, hands and houlette. We wanted you, dear reader, to feel the imprint, the impression, the historical trace of the illustration

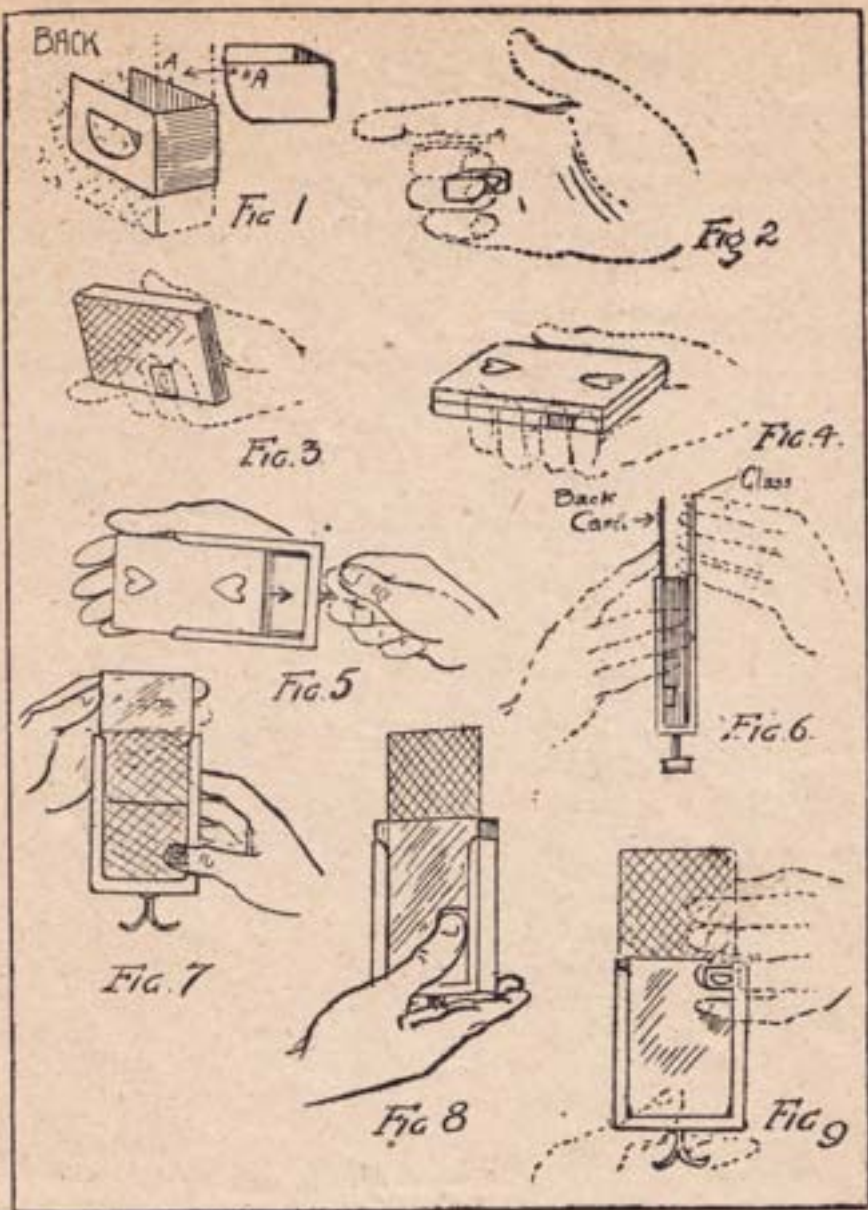


Harry Smith

blocks in question. I can only hope that the tactile sensation of this souvenir helps to express how pleasing it is to see two pieces of old technology that were designed for each other – blocks and press – united. — **JOE CULPEPPER**

* Printing the *Magical* inserts it should be mentioned, would not have been possible without the gracious support of the editor, Mr. David Ben, and the current Master of Massey College, Mr. John Fraser. I would also like to thank Mr. Ransom for providing me with some of the excellent photos of the shop included here and for sharing with me his personal memories of the atmosphere at Whitlam's.

† Since the writing of this article, research has come to light that the “Sybil Rising Cards” invented by Albert Edward Page and advertised for sale by Will Goldston in *The Magazine of Magic* (March 1917) predates the earliest advertisement of “The Upton Rising Card Trick” (November 1919 in *The Magical Bulletin*). Even more intriguing is that the illustrations accompanying the instructions sold for both of these effects are apparently identical. Upton's card rise may be a direct copy of Sybil's. At the very least, information brought to my attention by Richard Kaufman, David Ben, and Edwin Dawes has narrowed down the potential illustrators of the keepsake in your possession: C. Thompson, one of Goldston's illustrators at that time, is almost definitely the artist responsible. I invite the obsessive among you to identify characteristic traits of his artistic style, or to delve more deeply into any aspect of the magic history in this article.



THE UPTON RISING CARD TRICK