



A Hard Act to Follow

Guy Burch, editor of Britain's BBR magazine, describes following in the footsteps of William Covill Jr.



It has taken me almost 20 years to complete my book on 'Inks, Glues, Polish & Blacking Bottles.' When I started it, I had in mind a British version of William Covill Jr's 'Ink Bottles and Inkwells' published in 1971. It was already well out of print when I got a second-hand copy in the 1990s and is still a collector's bible with regards to American inks. The book

pictured 200 embossed bottles. When his collection was sold by Skinner in 1980 the sale ran to 840 lots; his provenance still adding a premium when they appear at auction.

It felt like a tall order to even consider trying to match it for breadth, and pretty rapidly I understood quite what an achievement it had been. The sheer headache of trying to bring some kind of order to the vast range of this field is the first problem. Covill settled on dividing them into shape and type headings with each preceded with an introductory essay where he would add some company details or discuss patents. It was an elegant book but not the model I've used. There is no such thing as a 'definitive' book on bottles. Something I learnt

having completed my poisons book 'Deadly Pleasures' for BBR. It has hundreds listed but new bottles always come along. Apart from comprehensiveness, a book is defined by the story you plan to tell. Helping me were plenty of collectors, not least in the USA.

My own book has 2,000 actual items pictured in colour and many more in adverts and trade images (in total around 4,000 images are included). It takes the form of a dictionary with companies, countries and bottles types (shapes) listed alphabetically. Brands and retailers run from Acton's Mexican Blacking to Zuline's marking ink. Under each I've tried to run down a company history and then order all their bottles beginning with the earliest. Covill did not supply information on prices, rarity or provenance (they were all his!) but I have attempted this together with colours and sizes known. All my listings are given a unique code which is cross referenced with relevant auction





lots, Covill's and others (Joe Mathew's excellent *Teakettle Guide* for instance). Embossed or labelled bottles can be found by name (even by scant letters or monograms) but plain ones require separate headings that match Covill's: from 'Bell Shaped' to 'Umbrellas,' via 'Octangonals' and 'Teakettle Fountains.' Figurals too, with entries for Barrels, Cottages, Shoes and Boots, Human Figures and more are scattered throughout.

collecting bottles was far more restrained by country but not today.

Although I cover all the main companies, I haven't attempted to do a comprehensive American guide. Ed and Lucy Faulkner's *Inks*, which can legitimately claim to be the heir to Covill where American bottles are concerned, is the nearest to that. They very kindly printed me a copy of the 2017 edition which I was pleased to see used a similar method to order things. Great minds think alike! What I felt was needed was a book that centred on Britain and its old empire, but covered the rest of the world. In Covill's day



With the advent of the Internet and online auctions, collecting has become international. Although there are blogs and forums there was nothing in the way of a comprehensive guide. It became clear to me that just confining the book to British bottles was not sufficient. It was necessary to discuss their similarity and confusion caused by bottles that were turning up all over the world but may not have originated in that country. The exporting of companies such as Staffords for instance, who had British bottles made over here, or of David's of New York who registered and ordered theirs from British potters, or Carr's who sold mostly for export to Australia.

I discuss the design. Confusion with perfumes and lamps; why a glue or type of ink needed a different shape; why the pens you used altered the bottles needed. The differences in bottle making are discussed under country headings: pontils and burst lips for instance. Where Covill did get things wrong was in assigning some bottles to USA. This is most apparent with teakettles and figurals, many of which he thought American but are actually French. I have full listings for not only the fancy French makers like Maurin and Antoine & Fils, but also Dutch, German, Scandinavian and Eastern European bottles and more. My book concentrates on throw-away packaging: I do not include refillable inkwells and fancy ornamental teakettles that were sold empty. I have done the work on these too but that will have to wait for the next volume!

BBR aims to launch the book at the UK Summer National on the 1st and 2nd of July 2023. It will be some 440 pages, with a hardback, colour dust jacketed cover with colour images throughout. Priced at £100 but Alan Blakeman at BBR, handling the distribution, is offering a pre-publication price of just £80. Overseas postage will be calculated exactly once printed but collectors can pre order with a deposit of £20. Contact Alan: alan@onlinebbr.com.

