BIBLIOGRAPHICAL PRESSES

BRIAN J. McMULLIN

SYDNEY, AT THE PISCATOR PRESS
1978
RECALLING A PLEASANT OCCASION

On Tuesday evening, 24 August 1976, Dr. Brian J. McMullin of Monash University spoke to the Friends of the University of Sydney Library on the subject of bibliographical presses.

This address was followed by a 'print-in' at which individual Friends struck off copies of a commemorative leaflet, issued as occasional publication number 14 of the Piscator Press.

So much interest was aroused by this event and, in particular, by Dr. McMullin's remarks, that he has kindly consented to have them reproduced as number 15 of the Press's publications.

Accompanying the text is a reproduction of the fine drawing made by Allan Gamble of the Improved Albion Press on which this and all the preceding fourteen publications have been printed. The discerning will note that this sketch, made in 1964, predates the provision of a frisket for the Press. Indeed it was its publication in an issue of the University of Sydney Gazette in that year which directly resulted in a frisket being fabricated and donated by a graduate of the University.

Harrison Bryan
Librarian
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL PRESSES

by

BRIAN J. McMULLIN

I start by presenting you with four related pieces of information: in Britain the market is being gauged for replicas of wooden, flat-bed, hand-operated printing presses based on those in everyday use in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries; Alan Brissenden has resurrected the Adelaide University Imperial iron press; the Friends of the Baillieu Library have bought for Melbourne University an Alexandra iron press; and the Library Council of Victoria has transferred to the Graduate School of Librarianship at Monash on indefinite loan an Albion iron press. The four pieces of information are related in that they are all connected with a phenomenon usually dubbed 'the bibliographical press movement', which is one variety of the larger phenomenon, amateur printing.

Other varieties are considered by Roderick Cave in his book 'The Private Press', published in 1971, in which he devotes separate chapters to the patron's press, the scholarly press, the press as an educational toy, the press as an aristocratic plaything, the press as an alternative publisher... And so on, through clandestine presses—both moral and immoral—the Reverend Mr. Daniel, Kelmscott and after, until we reach the final chapter of the history, 'School and Teaching Presses', where an account of the bibliographical press occupies the last two pages. In Cave's scheme of things the bibliographical press clearly occupies an insignificant position. But among academics—particularly in departments of languages and literatures—and among librarians, the
bibliographical press is likely to be the most immediately important variety
of amateur printing.

What is a bibliographical press? Philip Gaskell has defined it in this way:
By a 'bibliographical' press is meant a workshop or laboratory which is carried
on chiefly for the purpose of demonstrating and investigating the printing tech-
niques of the past by means of setting type by hand, and of printing from it
on a simple press.

And why should one be concerned with investigating the printing tech-
niques of the past? Here I can do no better than quote the oft-quoted view
of R.B. McKerrow. Writing in *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* in
1913, in an article entitled 'Notes on Bibliographical Evidence for Literary
Students and Editors of English Works of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Cen-
turies', he had this to say:

> It would, I think, be an excellent thing if all who propose to edit an Elizabethan
work from contemporary printed texts could be set to compose a sheet or two
in as exact facsimile as possible of some Elizabethan octavo or quarto, and to
print it on a press constructed on the Elizabethan model... They would have constantly and clearly before their minds all the processes through
which the matter of the work before them has passed, from its first being written
down by the pen of its author to its appearance in the finished volume, and would
know when and how mistakes are likely to arise; while they would be constant-
ly on the watch for those little pieces of evidence which are supplied by the actual
form and 'make-up' of a book and which are often of the highest value,
in that they can hardly ever be 'faked'.

This 1913 article was to form the basis for McKerrow's *Introduction to
Bibliography*, but by 1927 he had modified his position somewhat. Referring
to his earlier assertion about the desirability of actually going through the
process of composing and printing on a hand press in order to obtain 'a clear
and lively comprehension of the processes by which books of Shakespeare's
time were produced', he adds:

> But though a little practical experience of this kind would probably be much
the easiest and quickest way of putting oneself in a position to appreciate the
evidence which a book may contain as to its own history, it is by no means essen-
tial. The numerous processes through which all books pass are perfectly simple,
and very little trouble will suffice for the understanding of them.

Perhaps this shift is determined by an assumed need to justify his *Introduct-
ton to Bibliography*. 

2
Nonetheless, the rationale for the bibliographical press remains the same as McKerrow expounded it in 1913—i.e. by undertaking (or perhaps by having demonstrated) the composing of printed matter by hand, and its imposing and printing on a flat-bed, hand-operated press, the student may appreciate more readily the process by which his text has been transmitted and therefore the kinds of contamination it may have been subjected to in its progress from the author's pen to the owner's or the library's shelf. By 'student' I mean not just the budding bibliographer, editor, textual critic or historian of printing, but also the student of literature, historical linguistics, the history of science—in fact any discipline which depends on the close analysis of printed texts. You will note also that the statement of rationale necessarily limits our concern to texts originally set and printed by hand—i.e. to a period up to the early decades of the Nineteenth Century. And I also use 'student' in the widest sense.

The various kinds of bibliographical evidence, the usefulness of which will hopefully become apparent to the student in his stint in the printing house, will include such things as:

1. the physical limits of a composing stick and the possible effects of justification on spellings,
2. the process of casting-off and the possible consequences of verse set as prose or prose as verse at the end of formes (or indeed the loss of text or the invention of matter when casting-off has been grossly inaccurate),
3. methods of imposition, the use of pins, the forme as a unit, skeletons and their movements, frisket-bite, pulled type,

—and so on.

An activity which involves the mind and fingers manipulating small pieces of metal is obviously subject to a multitude of hazards. After a few sessions composing and printing, the student may well be inclined to believe that any textual crux may be explained by recourse to 'pied type' or 'foolscap'. Indeed, a knowledge of printing-house procedures may be a dangerous thing, and one might well be excused for regarding as flights of fancy not-a-few published discussions of type shortage, recurring types, the significance of press figures or the analysis of setting stints. These uncontrolled extravagancies do not, however, affect the objectives of the
bibliographical press: they simply show that there are limits to the demonstrable in bibliographical analysis.

The first bibliographical press to be established was at the Yale University Library in 1927, when Carl P. Rollins, the former Yale University Printer, founded The Bibliographic Press, using an 1839 Albion. Gaskell’s census of bibliographical presses records only three more foundations prior to the Second World War, and of these two were of particular significance in that they were wooden, so-called ‘common’ presses (though in fact ‘improved’), built from specifications in Stower’s *Printer’s Grammar* (1808) and Moxon’s *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing* (1683–4). The first of these two, built by Keith Povey, was a quarter-scale model, but the second—at University College, London—was a full-scale replica of the Bleau ‘improved’ press described by Moxon: built in 1913, it was destroyed during the War. However, a second press was built in 1951 by Hugh Smith and Arthur Brown, and it is still operating—or at least was known to be quite recently.

Ideally one would hope to find an original wooden press in order to replicate exactly the process of printing before the Nineteenth Century. But only about fifty or so are known to have survived anywhere in the world, and it’s doubtful if more than a handful of these are complete and operational. One alternative to acquiring a wooden press is obviously to build your own, as University College, London, and the Joint University Libraries of Nashville, Tennessee, have done; and soon it may be possible to buy a replica ready-made. The other alternative is simply to accept a flat-bed iron press, which, though it will date from after 1800, will operate on basically the same principle as its wooden predecessor. Most bibliographical presses are indeed iron.

In 1964 Gaskell accounted for 31 bibliographical presses at 25 institutions in the English-speaking world, and since then the number has probably doubled. To name only those that I have seen, there are two additional presses at UCLA and two more at Leeds to add to Gaskell’s list, and there are new establishments in the Department of English at McMaster and in the School of
Bibliographical Presses

Library and Information Science at the University of Western Ontario, not to mention the three Australian presses mentioned at the outset.

Typically, however, bibliographical presses are used for printing greetings cards, letter-heads, simple posters and other ephemera. (At the other end of the scale from presses printing ephemera is the Wai-te-ata Press at the Victoria University of Wellington, which has produced at least one commercial effort, an edition of the morality play Everyman.) Often a constraint is what can be achieved by students during a course in bibliography, or by assorted enthusiasts out-of-hours. One reason for the abandonment of the Bibliographical Pamphlet series in Auckland was explicitly that 'the labour of publishing and distributing such material seemed too great for the student volunteers who operated the press.' Here I might add that another constraint is the enthusiasm of the prime mover, whether a member of a teaching department or the library: if the prime mover leaves the institution it is not uncommon for the press to be disbanded, or at least to go into a period of what might charitably be called 'inactivity'. For example, when Philip Gaskell left Cambridge in 1958 the Water Lane Press closed down and—amazingly—the Stanhope press was shipped off to Don McKenzie in Wellington. I suspect that there are other examples.

What about the quality of what is printed on bibliographical presses? On the basis of presses that I've been connected with I have to admit that the level is generally low. One reason is probably that personnel changes so often: graduate students—who are the ones doing formal courses in bibliography—are usually around for only a year or so and with other demands on their time are often not particularly diligent. Another reason is probably that enthusiasm is no substitute for technical skill when it comes to diagnosing the cause of poor press work. Professional aid is sometimes available from local tradesmen, but as fewer and fewer of even the oldest hands have ever operated a flat-bed, trial and error and makeshift are the common lot of bibliographical presses.
Though there is a Stanhope press at Victoria University, Wellington and though in North America Columbians and Washingtons are more likely to be found, the staple of the bibliographical press movement has been the Albion. First built about 1820, it was still being built in 1940, when four were ordered by the India Office Stores Department for the Jail Press, Bangalore. The name Albion is associated with the triumvirate of private presses—Kelmscott, Doves and Ashendene—though whether from ready availability or from acknowledged superiority I don’t know. (It has always been recognized for its freedom from wear, even if the Columbian was regarded as superior in the larger sizes because more powerful). At this point it may be worth adding that the Imperial and Alexandra are variations of the Albion. A few iron flat-bed presses are probably still in use for jobbing work and posters, but most survivors have been used in their later days for proofing; consequently many have had their frisket removed, since the frisket is an impediment in proofing.

When bibliographical presses are established they often inherit quantities of equipment, such as frames, cases, furniture etc., and supplies of type which not infrequently comprise early-twentieth-century faces such as the now-despised Cheltenham or sans-serifs previously used for jobbing work. Fortunately for the new printers, they have been able to replace unsuitable founts—finance allowing—by Monotype founts, and it is no accident that Adelaide, Sydney and Monash have all chosen Bembo, a 1929 re-cutting of a roman originally cut by Francesco Griffo for Aldus Manutius and first used in 1495 to print Cardinal Pietro Bembo's dialogue De Actu a. (The accompanying italic is based on a fount employed by the printer Giovanni Tagliente in Venice in 1524).

Even before composing and printing-off have been mastered, the beginning printers are faced with the question of what to print. Here there are two schools of thought. One, which might be called the 'aesthetic' school, believes that the amateur press should not attempt to be useful, that pleasure is to be gained from printing well, that what is printed is of secondary importance. The other—to which I belong—might be called the 'utilitarian', and it believes that if you’re going to print you may as well print something useful, or at least something you believe is going to be useful. But having advanced
Bibliographical Presses

the claims of utility I must concede that the method of production and 'publication' may be incompatible with the dissemination of the useful object—i.e. that useful works may need to be introduced into more orthodox publishing systems.

As examples of useful products of bibliographical presses I would cite the series of bibliographical pamphlets printed on an Albion at the Department of English press (later the Mount Pleasant Press) at Auckland University between 1959 and 1963. Among the useful contributions were Patricia Bergquist's *An Annotated Bibliography of the Sponges of New Zealand*, Bill Cameron's *New Zealand's First Printing Press. The Story of the Mission Press brought to Kerikeri in 1830 and back to Australia in 1844*, and Olive Johnson's *Denis Glover. A Catalogue of his separately-published work*.

The best work that I have seen was done by students of librarianship at UCLA, helped—I imagine—by the fact that one of the presses there is in regular use for university jobbing work under the direction of a permanent employee. The worst is probably what we did in Auckland; paper, inking, tympan packing, platen pressure or whatever, we seldom reached even a passable standard.

My judgements may be tested by reference to the examples which I invite you to examine.

This, no.15 in the series of occasional publications of the Piscator Press, was wholly set by hand by Jean Murray, Barbara Troy, Neil Radford, Jurgen Wegner and Harrison Bryan in Bembo 10, 12, 24 and 36 pt. and struck off on the Improved Albion press in the Fisher Library, University of Sydney, in 1978.