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978-0-521-18832-6 - The Printers, Stationers and Bookbinders of Westminster
and London from 1476 to 1535

E. Gordon Duff

Excerpt

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PART I.

1476—1500.

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LECTURE I.

THE PRINTERS AT WESTMINSTER.

WHILE the history of the invention and introduction of the art of printing into the various countries of Europe is not only obscure, but still the subject of endless controversy, the history of its introduction into England is now practically settled.

There are no troublesome and incomprehensible documents as in the case of France. No questionable references or undatable fragments such as Dutch and German bibliographers have to contend with. The only attempt that has been made to bring forward an earlier printer than William Caxton is founded upon the misprinted date in the first book printed at Oxford.

In 1664, while the Company of Stationers and the King were quarrelling over the question which had or should have the most power in matters pertaining to printing, a certain Richard Atkyns put forth a tract, now exceedingly rare, called *The Original and Growth of Printing*. In this tract, intended to uphold the

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King's rights, attention was drawn for the first time to the Oxford book. "A book came into my hands," writes Atkyns, "printed at Oxford, A.D. 1468, which was three years before any of the recited authors would allow it to be in England." 'Around this book Atkyns wove a wonderful romance, in the style of the earlier legends about Coster and Gutenberg. Rumours of the new art, he suggests, having reached England, trusted men were sent over to bribe or kidnap an eligible printer and bring him over secretly, along with a press, type, and other *impedimenta*, to England. This was accordingly done, and a certain Frederick Corsellis was conveyed into England, and set up a press in Oxford. One curious point has escaped all commentators on this story, and that is that a real person named Corsellis did come over to England from the Low Countries about that time, and was an ancestor of several well-known London families in Atkyns's time, such as the Van Ackers, the Wittewronges and the Middletons.

Atkyns referred for evidence to documents which have never been found, and his story has met with the disbelief it deserved, but the Oxford book with the date of 1468 not only exists, but still has supporters who consider, or say they consider, the date to be genuine.

Singer in the early part of the century wrote a book in favour of its authenticity, though, as he afterwards attempted to suppress his work, we may conclude he had changed his opinion. Mr Madan of the Bodleian, in his recent admirable history of Oxford printing, clings hesitatingly to 1468, "but quaere" as he would himself say. Generally, however it is agreed that the

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date is a misprint for 1478. The book has printed signatures, which are not known to have been used before 1472, and when the book is placed alongside the two others issued from the same press in 1479 and printed in the same type, it falls naturally into its proper place, taking just the small precedence which its slightly lesser excellence of workmanship warrants.

Having now disposed of Caxton's only rival, let us turn to Caxton himself. It would, I think, be out of place here to recapitulate however shortly the history of Caxton's early life, since it has been so fully and excellently done in that standard book Blades's *Life of Caxton*. What is more to our purpose is to pass on to the time when, as an influential and prosperous man, he laid the foundations of his career as a printer. By 1463 Caxton had been appointed to the office of governor of the English nation in the Low Countries, a post of considerable importance, and entailing the supervision of trade and traders, and this office he held until about the year 1469. At this latter date he was also in the service of the Duchess of Burgundy, though in what capacity is not stated; but he certainly employed himself at her request in making translations of romances. The *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, a well-known romance of the period, was translated between the years 1469 and 1471, and presented to the duchess in September of the latter year. In the prologue of the printed edition Caxton explains that after the duchess had received her copy, many other persons desired copies also, but that finding the labour of writing too wearisome for him, and not expeditious enough for his friends, he had "practised and learnt, at his great

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charge and expense, to ordain the book in print, to the end that every man might have them at once."

Now in 1471, when Caxton finished his translation of the *Recueil*, he was living at Cologne, a city remarkable even at that time for the number of its printers, and the first town that Caxton had visited where the art was practised. He had just finished the tedious copying of a large manuscript, so that the advantages of printing would be manifest to him; and we may be tolerably certain that it was about this time and at this town that he took his first lessons in the art and mastered the mechanical processes.

Printing by this time had ceased to be a secret art, nor was there such a demand for books as to make it a very valuable one. The printed books of Germany had at an early date found their way to Bruges, and people's eyes were accustomed to the sight of the printed page, though the nobles still preferred manuscripts, as being more ornamental and costly. There are copies in the Cambridge University Library and at Lambeth of the *Cicero de officiis*, printed at Mainz by Schoiffer in 1466, which were bought in 1467 at Bruges by John Russell, afterwards Bishop of Lincoln, when abroad on a diplomatic mission; and a speech of his, delivered at Ghent in 1470, on the occasion of the investiture of the Duke of Burgundy with the order of the Garter, was one of Caxton's earliest printed productions.

A very strong piece of evidence to my mind that Caxton learnt at Cologne is to be found in the epilogue to the English translation of the *De proprietatibus rerum*, by Bartholomæus Anglicus, which was printed by W. de Worde, Caxton's apprentice and successor, in

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1496. This epilogue, written by De Worde himself, contains these lines :—

And also of your charyte call to remembraunce,
The soule of William Caxton, first prynter of this boke,
In Laten tonge at Coleyn, hymself to avaunce,
That every well disposyd man, may theron loke.

Now this is a perfectly clear statement that Caxton printed a *Bartholomæus* in Latin at Cologne, and we know an edition of the book manifestly printed at Cologne about the time Caxton was there. The type in which it is printed greatly resembles that of some other Cologne printers, and it seems to be connected with some of Caxton's Bruges types. At any rate, the story cannot be put aside as without foundation. It is not, of course, suggested that Caxton printed the book by himself or owned the materials, but only that he assisted in its production. He was learning the art of printing in the office where this book was being prepared, and his practical knowledge was acquired by assisting to print it.

Returning to Bruges, he set about turning his knowledge to account, and in partnership with a writer of manuscripts, named Colard Mansion, began to make or obtain the necessary materials.

Between the years 1471, when Caxton had learned the art at Cologne, and 1474, when he set about obtaining material, printing-presses had started work at Utrecht, Alost, and Louvain. Caxton would most naturally turn for assistance to a town in his own neighbourhood, and there is very little doubt that this town was Louvain, and that the printer who assisted him was John Veldener.

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About 1475 their first book was issued, the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, the first book printed in the English language. It is a small thick folio of 352 leaves, and though not uncommon in an imperfect condition, is of the very greatest rarity when perfect. Two other books were printed by 1476, *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* and the *Quatre derrenières choses*, the latter a very rare book, of which only two copies are known.

In 1476 Caxton obtained a new fount of type, and leaving the first fount with Colard Mansion, who continued to use it for a short time, prepared to set out with his new material for England.

It must have been early in 1476 that Caxton returned and set to work. He took up his residence in Westminster at a house with the heraldic sign of the "Red Pale," which was situated in the Almonry, a place close to the Abbey where alms were distributed to the poor, and where Margaret, Countess of Richmond, the mother of Henry VII., and a great patroness of learning, built alms-houses. The exact position of Caxton's house is not known, but it was probably on some part of the ground lately covered by the Westminster Aquarium.

The first dated book printed in England was the *Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres*, translated from the French by Earl Rivers, a friend and patron of Caxton, and edited by Caxton himself, who added the chapter "concernyng wymmen," a chapter which, with its prologue, exhibits a considerable amount of humour.

It is interesting to notice that, as the book is in English, we alone of European nations started our press with a book in the vernacular.

The ordinary copies of the *Dictes* are without

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colophon, though the printer and year are in the epilogue, but a copy formerly in the Althorp Library and now at Manchester has an imprint which states that the book was finished on the 18th November, 1477. Although we count the *Dictes or Sayengis* as the first book printed in England on account of its being the first dated book, it is quite possible that some may have preceded it. Between the time of Caxton's arrival in 1476 and the end of 1478 about twenty-one books were printed, and only two have imprints, so that the rest are merely ranged conjecturally by the evidence of type or other details. Now in 1510 W. de Worde issued an edition of *King Apolyn of Tyre*, translated from the French by one of his assistants, Robert Copland, who in his preface writes as follows: "My worshipful master Wynken de Worde, having a little book of an ancient history of a kyng, sometyme reigning in the countree of Thyre called Appolyn, concernynge his malfortunes and peryllous adventures right espouentables, bryefly compyled and pyteous for to here, the which boke I Robert Coplande have me applyed for to translate out of the Frensshe language into our maternal Englysshe tongue at the exhortacion of my forsayd mayster, accordynge dyrectly to myn auctor, gladly followynge the trace of my mayster Caxton, begynnyng with small storyes and pamfletes and so to other." Now this Robert Copland was spoken of a little later as the oldest printer in England, so that he may well have known a good deal about the beginning of Caxton's career. We find a very similar case in Scotland. Printing was introduced there mainly for the purpose of printing the Aberdeen *Breviary*, but the first thing

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the printers did was to issue a series of small poetical pieces by Dunbar, Chaucer, and others, an exactly similar kind of set to the small Caxton pieces in the Cambridge University Library.

In connexion with these Caxton pieces I noticed the other day a strange statement. The writer was speaking of Henry Bradshaw's knowledge of Caxton, and went on to say that "to his bibliographical genius the Cambridge University Library owes the possession of its many unique Caxtons and unique Caxton fragments." The library, however, owes them mainly to the much-maligned John Bagford, who collected the early English books which came to the University with Bishop Moore's library. The monstrous collection of title-pages in the British Museum, generally associated with Bagford's name, was made by the venerated founder of English bibliography, Joseph Ames.

Before the end of 1478 Caxton had printed about twenty-one books. Of these sixteen were small works, all containing less than fifty leaves; of the others the most important is the first edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, of which there is, I think, no perfect copy. Blades speaks of a fine perfect copy in the library of Merton College, Oxford, and remarks also that Dibdin ignorantly spoke of it as imperfect. In Dibdin's time, however, it certainly was imperfect, for I have seen some notes of Lord Spencer's referring to his having sent some leaves from an imperfect copy to the college to assist them in perfecting their own, a courtesy which they repaid by presenting to the library at Althorp their duplicate and only other known copy of *Wednesday's Fast* printed by W. de Worde in 1532.

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Among the other books of the period of special interest is the *Propositio Johannis Russell*, which has often been ascribed to the Bruges press, as the speech of which it consists was delivered in the Low Countries. Lord Spencer's copy had a curious history. It is bound up in a volume of English and Latin MSS., and in the Brand sale in 1807 the volume appeared among the MSS., with a note, "A work on Theology and Religion with five leaves at the end, a very great curiosity, very early printed on wooden blocks, or type." It was bought by the Marquis of Blandford for forty-five shillings, and at his sale ten years after cost Lord Spencer £126.

Another interesting book is the *Infancia Salvatoris*, of which the only known copy is at Göttingen, being one of the two unique Caxtons which are in foreign libraries. It was originally in the Harleian Library, which was sold entire to Osborne the bookseller, and was bought with many other books for the Göttingen University. It is in its old red Harleian binding, with Osborne's price, fifteen shillings marked inside, and the note of the Göttingen librarian: "aus dem Katalogen Thomas Osborne in London 12 Maii 1749 (No. 4179) erkaufft."

In the first group of books comes also the only printed edition of the *Sarum Ordinale* or *Pica*, which was superseded by Clement Maydeston's *Directorium Sacerdotum*. Unfortunately the book is only known from some fragments rescued from a binding and now in the British Museum. To it refers the curious little advertisement put out by Caxton, the only example of a printer's advertisement in England in the fifteenth century, though we know of many foreign specimens: