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Charles Knight

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PART I.



THE OLD PRINTER.

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CHAPTER I.

The Weald of Kent — Caxton's School-days — French disused — English taught — Variations in English — Books before Printing — Libraries — Transcribers — Books for the Great — Book Trade — No Books for the People — Changes produced by Printing.

IN the first book printed in the English language, the subject of which was the 'Histories of Troy,' William Caxton, the translator of the work from the French, in his prologue or preface, says, by way of apology for his simpleness and imperfectness in the French and English languages, "In France was I never, and was born and learned mine English in Kent, in the Weald, where I doubt not is spoken as broad and rude English as in any place of England." The Weald of Kent is now a fertile district, rich in corn-land and pasture, with farm-houses and villages spread over its surface, intersected by good roads, and a railway running through the heart of it, bringing the scattered inhabitants closer and closer to each other. But at the period when William Caxton was born, and learnt his English in the Weald, it was a wild district with a scanty population; its inhabitants had

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little intercourse with the towns, the affairs of the busy world went on without their knowledge and assistance, they were more separated from the great body of their countrymen than a settler in Canada or Australia is at the present day. It is easy to understand therefore why they should have spoken a "broad and rude English" at the time of Caxton's boyhood, during the reign of Henry V. and the beginning of that of Henry VI. William Lambarde, who wrote a hundred and fifty years after this period, having published his 'Perambulation of Kent' in 1570, mentions as a common opinion touching this Weald of Kent, "that it was a great while together in manner nothing else but a desert and waste wilderness, not planted with towns or peopled with men as the outsides of the shire were, but stored and stuffed with herds of deer and droves of hogs only;" and he goes on to say that, "although the property of the Weald was at the first belonging to certain known owners, yet it was not then allotted into tenancies." The Weald of Kent came to be taken, he says, "even as men were contented to inhabit it, and by peace-meal to rid it of the wood, and to break it up with the plough." In some lonely farm, then, of this wild district, are we, upon the best of evidence, his own words, to fix the birth-place and the earliest home of the first English printer.

The father of William Caxton was in all probability a proprietor of land. At any rate, he desired to bestow upon his son all the advantages of

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Chap. I.

CAXTON'S SCHOOL-DAYS.

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education which that age could furnish. The honest printer, many years after his school-days, looks back upon that spring-time of his life with feelings that make us honour the simple worth of his character. In his 'Life of Charles the Great,' printed in 1485, he says, "I have emprised [undertaken] and concluded in myself to reduce [translate] this said book into our English, as all along and plainly ye may read, hear, and see, in this book here following. Beseeching all them that shall find fault in the same to correct and amend it, and also to pardon me of the rude and simple reducing. And though so be there no gay terms, nor subtle nor new eloquence, yet I hope that it shall be understood, and to that intent I have specially reduced it after the simple cunning that God hath lent to me, whereof I humbly and with all my heart thank Him, and also am bounden to pray for my father's and mother's souls, that in my youth set me to school, by which, by the sufferance of God, I get my living I hope truly. And that I may so do and continue, I beseech Him to grant me of His grace; and so to labour and occupy myself virtuously, that I may come out of debt and deadly sin, that after this life I may come to His bliss in heaven." Caxton seems to have had the rare happiness to have had his father about him to a late period of his life. According to a record in the accounts of the churchwardens of the parish church of St. Margaret's, Westminster, in which parish the first

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printer carried on his business, it appears that one William Caxton, who is conjectured to have been the father, was buried on the 18th of May, 1480.

Some time before the period of Caxton's boyhood, a great change had taken place in the general system of education in England. In the time of Edward III., about half a century before the period of which we speak, the children in the grammar-schools were not taught English at all. It was the policy of the first Norman kings, long continued by their successors, to get rid of the old English or Saxon language altogether; and to make the people familiar with the Norman French, the language of the conquerors. The new statutes of the realm were written in French; so were the decisions of the judges, and the commentaries on the laws in general. Ralph Higden, in a sort of chronicle which Caxton printed, says, "Children in schools, against the usage and manner of all other nations, be compelled for to leave their own language, and for to construe their lessons and their things in French; and so they have since Normans came first into England. Also gentlemen be taught for to speak French from the time that they rocked in their cradle, and can speak and play with a child's brooch [stick or other toy], and uplandish men [countrymen] will liken themselves to gentlemen, and delight with great business for to speak French, to be told of." John de Trevisa, the translator of Higden's 'Polychronicon,'

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writing some forty years later, "This manner was much used before the Great Plague, and is since some deal changed; for Sir John Cornewaile, a master of grammar, changed the teaching in grammar-schools, and construction in French; and other schoolmasters use the same way now, in the year of our Lord 1385, the ninth year of King Richard II., and leave all French in schools, and use all construction in English. Wherein they have advantage one way:—that is, that they learn the sooner their grammar; and in another, disadvantage, for now they learn no French, which is hurt for them that shall pass the sea." It was this change of system, operating upon his early instruction, which caused Caxton, as a translator, to be so diffident of his own capacity to render faithfully what was before him out of French into English. Indeed from his earliest youth to the close of his literary career, the English language was constantly varying, through the introduction of new words and phrases; and there was a marked distinction between the courtly dialect and that of the commonalty. We have seen how he speaks of the broad and rude English of his native Weald. But towards the close of his life, in a book printed by him in 1490, he mentions the difficulty he had in pleasing "some gentlemen, which late blamed me, saying, that in my translations I had over curious terms, which could not be understood of common people, and desired me to use old and homely terms in my transla-

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tions. And fain would I satisfy every man ; and so to do, took an old book and read therein ; and certainly the English was so rude and broad that I could not well understand it. And also my Lord Abbot of Westminster did show to me late certain evidences written in old English, for to reduce it into our English now used, and certainly it was written in such wise that it was more like to Dutch than English ; I could not reduce nor bring it to be understood. And certainly our language now used varieth far from that which was used and spoken when I was born : for we Englishmen be born under the domination of the moon, which is never stedfast, but ever wavering, waxing one season, and waneth and decreaseth another season ; and that common English that is spoken in one shire varieth from another. Insomuch that in my days happened that certain merchants were in a ship in Thames, for to have sailed over the sea into Zealand, and for lack of wind they tarried at Foreland, and went to land for to refresh them ; and one of them named Sheffelde, a mercer, came into an house and asked for meat, and especially he asked after *eggs* ; and the good wife answered, that she could speak no French ; and the merchant was angry, for he also could speak no French, but would have had eggs, and she understood him not. And then at last, another said that he would have *eyren* ; then the good wife said that she understood him well. Lo, what should a man in these days now write, *eggs* or *eyren* ? certainly it is hard to

please every man, by cause of diversity and change of language. For in these days, every man that is in any reputation in his country will utter his communication and matters in such manners and terms that few men shall understand them. And some honest and good clerks have been with me, and desired me to write the most curious terms that I could find. And thus between plain, rude, and curious, I stand abashed; but in my judgment, the common terms that be daily used be lighter [easier] to be understood than the old and ancient English." In these days, when the same language with very slight variations is spoken from one end of the land to the other, it is difficult to imagine a state of things such as Caxton describes, in which the "common English which is spoken in one shire varieth from another," and there was a marked distinction between plain terms and curious terms. Easy and rapid communication, and above all the circulation of books, newspapers, and other periodical works, all free from provincial expressions, have made the "over curious terms which could not be understood of common people" more familiar to them than the "old and homely terms" which their forefathers used in their several counties, according to the restricted meanings which they retained in their local use. When there were no books amongst the community in general, there could be no universality of language. Of this want of books we may properly exhibit some details, chiefly to show one of the most re-

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markable differences which the lapse of four centuries has produced in our country.

We shall find it, we think, a more agreeable, as well as more instructive course, to look at the general subject of the supply of books in connexion with the orders of people who were to use them, rather than presenting a number of scattered facts, to exhibit the relative prices and scarcity of books in what are called the middle ages. We will first take the clergy, the scholars of those days. The mode in which books were multiplied by transcribers in the monasteries is clearly described by Richard de Bury, bishop of Durham, in his 'Philobiblon,' a treatise on the love of books, written by him in Latin in 1344:—"As it is necessary for a state to provide military arms, and prepare plentiful stores of provisions for soldiers who are about to fight, so it is evidently worth the labour of the church militant to fortify itself against the attacks of pagans and heretics with a multitude of sound books. But because everything that is serviceable to mortals suffers the waste of mortality through lapse of time, it is necessary for volumes corroded by age to be restored by renovated successors, that perpetuity, repugnant to the nature of the individual, may be conceded to the species. Hence it is that Ecclesiastes significantly says, in the 12th chapter, 'There is no end of making many books.' For as the bodies of books suffer continual detriment from a combined mixture of contraries in their composition, so a remedy is found out by

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the prudence of clerks, by which a holy book paying the debt of nature may obtain an hereditary substitute, and a seed may be raised up like to the most holy deceased, and that saying of Ecclesiasticus, chapter 30, be verified, 'The father is dead, and as it were not dead, for he hath left behind him a son like unto himself.'” The invention of paper, about a century and a half before Richard de Bury wrote, and its general employment instead of vellum for manuscripts in ordinary use, was a great step towards the multiplication of books. Transcribers necessarily became more numerous; but for a long period they wholly belonged to the monastic orders, and the books were essentially for the use of the clergy. Richard de Bury says, with the most supreme contempt for all others, whatever be their rank, “Laymen, to whom it matters not whether they look at a book turned wrong side upwards or spread before them in its natural order, are altogether unworthy of any communion with books.” But even to the privileged classes he is not sparing of his reproach as to the misuse of books. He reprobates the unwashed hands, the dirty nails, the greasy elbows leaning upon the volume, the munching of fruit and cheese over the open leaves, which were the marks of careless and idle readers. With a solemn reverence for a book at which we may smile, but with a smile of respect, he says, “Let there be a mature decorum in opening and closing of volumes, that they may neither be unclasped with precipitous haste, nor thrown