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978-1-108-07355-4 - The Life and Typography of William Caxton, England's First Printer: With Evidence of his Typographical Connection with Colard Mansion, the Printer at Bruges: Volume 1

William Blades

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This two-volume work on the life and activities of the printer William Caxton, a vital source for bibliographers, was written by another printer, William Blades, and published in 1861–3. Blades (1824–90), apprenticed into the family firm, developed a great interest in the history of his trade, collecting an extensive library of antiquarian books, and becoming an expert on early typefaces. He brings to his study of Caxton (which follows in the wake of works on incunabula by Ames, Herbert and Dibdin) his own practical experience of the craft of printing, largely unchanged, except for the addition of machine power, since Caxton's day. He examined more than 450 Caxton printings, in Britain, France and the Low Countries, while preparing the work. Volume 1 deals with Caxton's life and the background, in England and Europe, to his innovatory work. Transcriptions of contemporary documents are also supplied.

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# The Life and Typography of William Caxton, England's First Printer

*With Evidence of his Typographical Connection  
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VOLUME 1

WILLIAM BLADES



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University Printing House, Cambridge, CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108073554](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108073554)

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2014

This edition first published 1861  
This digitally printed version 2014

ISBN 978-1-108-07355-4 Paperback

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THE LIFE AND TYPOGRAPHY

OF

*William Caxton/*

ENGLAND'S FIRST PRINTER,

WITH EVIDENCE OF HIS TYPOGRAPHICAL CONNECTION

WITH

COLARD MANSION,

THE PRINTER AT BRUGES.

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COMPILED FROM ORIGINAL SOURCES BY WILLIAM BLADES.

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VOL. I.

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PUBLISHED BY JOSEPH LILLY, 15, BEDFORD STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON.

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1861.

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## PREFACE TO VOL. I.

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THE benefits conferred on Mankind by the Art of Printing are so obvious, and have been so often enforced by able writers, that although extremely tempting as a prefatory theme, there seems no occasion here to dilate upon them. Nor is there any need to introduce what may be termed the personal history of the present undertaking, and narrate the steps by which a simple list of books printed by Caxton, and arranged for private use, became augmented into two quarto volumes. But the reason for publishing at all *does* require some explanation, and the bibliographical student whose shelves are burthened with volumes treating of matters identical with those discussed in the following pages, may be inclined to demand an answer to the question which has often been put to the writer: Can anything new be said of Caxton?

The full answer to this question must be sought for in the volumes themselves, but it is proposed here briefly to lay before the reader the design of the work, and to draw his attention to those portions of it which affect subjects unnoticed by previous writers.

Since the publication in 1737 of "The Life of Mayster Wylyyam Caxton," by the Rev. John Lewis, of Margate, many biographies of our Prototypographer have appeared. Oldys, in 1748, wrote a careful and elaborate Article for the *Biographia Britannica*; Ames, in his *Typographical Antiquities*, 1749, paid great attention to the subject; Herbert followed with additions in 1785; and Dibdin, in 1810, having acquired the extensive manuscript Notes and Collections of Herbert and Gough, devoted his first volume entirely to Caxton and his works. Several "Lives," independently of the articles in various

Encyclopædias, have been subsequently published, but all owe the whole of their *facts* to Lewis, since whose time, more than 120 years ago, no new incident in Caxton's life has come before the English Public.

In this volume the following unpublished particulars will be offered to the Reader:—The Will of Robert Large, which, besides the well-known legacy to his apprentice, affords an insight to the household of which Caxton had become a member, together with some particulars of his fellow-apprentices.—Extracts from the old Records at Mercers' Hall, proving the exact date of Caxton's apprenticeship, and displaying him in the characters of Liveryman, Merchant Adventurer, Ambassador, and Governor of the English Merchants at Bruges.—The Charter of the Merchant Adventurers, preserved by Hakluyt, giving the exact character of the duties of Caxton as "Governor."—Extracts from the Archives at Bruges, yielding some interesting documents, viz.: The particulars of an Action brought against Caxton as surety for a defaulter; the presentation to him by the Town Council of certain complimentary gifts; and a Judgment awarded by him in his capacity of "Governor." This last was made known many years ago by M. Van Praet, but has not been noticed by any English writer.—Several particulars, though of less direct import, have been extracted from Liber Dunthorne, and Liber K. in the Archives of Guildhall; from the Churchwardens' Accounts of St. Margaret, Westminster, and from the Wardens' Accounts of the Guild of our Lady in the same Church.

In addition to the above, it has been thought advisable to add some collateral evidence of the opportunities enjoyed by Caxton of cultivating his taste for literature in the libraries by which he was surrounded. French Antiquaries have eagerly sought for and published anything connected with the regal libraries amassed by the Kings and Royal Princes of France; by successive Dukes of Burgundy; by Louis de Bruges, and others. An examination of the Catalogues of these libraries proves that the works chosen by Caxton

himself for issue, as well as those which he printed at the request of others, (English Poetry excepted,) were not only at that time very common in all the great libraries, but were also contained in those collections to which Caxton, from his position at Bruges, may without any stretch of probability be supposed to have had access.

Being familiar with all branches of the Art, I have endeavoured to use my practical experience in assisting me to discover the materials and practices employed while the Press was yet in its infancy. Some conclusions necessary to the argument concerning Caxton's early efforts as a Printer are introduced in this Volume; but that portion of the subject will be further elucidated in the opening Chapter of Vol. II.

To what Printer Caxton was indebted for his typographical instruction has never yet been decided. From the statement of Wynken de Worde we naturally turn to Cologne for some trace of him; but an examination of the productions of Ulric Zel, Arnold Therhoernen, P. de Olpe, and J. Koelhoff, who are the only known printers of that City from whom he could possibly have derived assistance, rendered the question still more puzzling, from the entire absence of similarity of typographical treatment. While perplexed with this discrepancy I turned to the early press of Bruges, of which the British Museum at that time (1859) could boast of only one small specimen; but the signs of typographical connection were there evident enough to induce me to inspect the collections of books, printed by Colard Mansion, in the libraries of Paris, Bruges, and Lille, scarcely half-a-dozen copies being known to exist elsewhere. This examination, of which the results are described in Chapter III., was to my mind decisive, and compelled me to reject entirely the uncertain claims of the unknown Cologne printer, and to ascribe to Colard Mansion, of Bruges, the entire typographical instruction of William Caxton. That this opinion is opposed to the settled belief of most Bibliographers is doubtless true; but that belief rests on a very questionable foundation, and although invested by age

with some degree of strength has maintained its ground only because unopposed. The Reader's impartial consideration of the arguments on the other side is therefore particularly requested. But little attention has hitherto been bestowed upon the internal structure of books, and here I believe can be found the only unimpeachable evidence—evidence which cannot be falsified.

As the connection between the Bruges and Westminster Presses has hitherto been unnoticed by any Bibliographical Writer, and as no history of the early Bruges Press has yet been issued in this Country, it is hoped that the short account of Colard Mansion and his typographical productions, in Chapter III., will be welcome to the English Reader, and the more so as some further particulars in his life, published since Van Praet wrote his “Notice sur Colard Mansion,” have been incorporated therewith. A few remarks on two works from the Press of that little-known and mysterious Printer, Jean Briton, of Bruges, have also been added.

After reviewing the early portion of Caxton's life—his mercantile career—the facilities afforded him by a residence in Bruges for developing a literary taste—the establishment of a Printing Press in that very city—and his typographical conversion—the Reader will be invited to accompany him to Westminster.

Here it would have been a pleasing task to show that Caxton held a higher chronological position on the Roll of Early Printers than that usually assigned to him, and still more gratifying to *prove* the introduction to England of the wonderful Art, so soon as 1474, the year fixed upon by most writers. But there is scarcely a shadow of evidence in favour of such an opinion, and therefore sentiment must give way to fact, and a somewhat later date be accepted.

Upon the settlement of Caxton at Westminster, in Court favour and in full employment, we might naturally expect to know and hear more about him than before; but here again the materials for his life are very scanty, being

almost entirely comprised in a chronological list of his books. At *these* he laboured to his dying day; and a literary and bibliographical account of each separate publication will be found in the Second Volume of this work.

After tracing the worthy Printer to his last resting-place, in St. Margaret's, Westminster, the legacy left to future generations in his original writings will be submitted to the Reader. Those writings are now for the first time collected together, and considerable care has been taken to make the transcript represent with great accuracy the original text. This accuracy may probably be deemed by some as needlessly minute; for not only have the plainest orthographical errors been reproduced, but also the chance turn of a letter or the accidental change of a figure. It appeared to me that no positive advantage would be gained by attempting to rectify these; for, if evident errors, the Reader himself can at a glance correct them, the same as he would if he were perusing the original; and where there is the least room for a doubt, every one will admit the necessity of an exact copy of the original.

Particular attention is drawn to the curious history of his own times, given by Caxton in the only work of any importance or extent known to have issued from his pen—the *Liber Ultimus* of “The Polycronicon.” So far as is known, this Chronicle, extending from A.D. 1360 to 1460, has never been reprinted, and it is hoped may form in itself no inapt supplement to the Polycronicon of Higden, as translated by Trevisa, and now being prepared for the Press, by the Rev. Churchill Babington, under the direction of the Master of the Rolls.

The foregoing is an outline of the chief contents of the Volume now offered to the Reader, which may be said to embrace the *personal* history of Caxton, in contradistinction to his Bibliographical career.

A few words on the Plates. Only those who have endeavoured to obtain a real facsimile,—one which, for identity of types and exactness of measurement will bear the closest examination by the side of the original,—know the

excessive difficulty of procuring an Artist clever and patient enough to execute the tracing, and workmen skilful enough to print it, without clogging or some worse distortion. If an engraving on Wood be the medium chosen, the opportunities of error are numerous—first in tracing the tracing on to the face of the block, and then from the engraver's tool. On Copper the difficulties, though of the same nature, are still greater. Lithography affords the only means of obtaining a real facsimile, as there the transfer is direct from the original tracing on to the stone. This method, however, is liable to two sources of error—the stretching of the tracing paper while in the act of being transferred to the stone, and the gradual clogging of the letters in working, to avoid which requires the greatest care and attention. Both these difficulties have been successfully surmounted in those Plates described as “Facsimile,” and the Reader may not only depend upon the accuracy of form, but may be sure that the width and depth of the page do not vary from the original, a result due to the care and ingenuity of Mr. A. C. Tupper, Barge Yard, Bucklersbury. As no two copies of the same work are in all respects exactly alike, the particular book from which each plate was taken is noted. The peculiar treatment of Plates III and VIII necessitating the adoption of a raised surface, they were carefully engraved on wood; and these, therefore, although extremely accurate, do not pretend to the niceties of a facsimile.

The Frontispiece, drawn in chalk, by Mr. John Tupper, is taken from an original painting in the collection of the Society of Antiquaries, who kindly permitted it to be copied for the present work, and to whom it was presented by the Rev. R. E. Kerrich, M.A., of Cambridge, in 1849. It is curious as a very early specimen of the Art of Portrait-painting, and exhibits great care in execution, excepting where evidently re-touched. It was probably painted at Bruges, from life; perhaps on the occasion of the Princess Margaret's marriage with Charles le Temeraire.

To render thanks for kindness received is always a pleasing duty, and with grateful feelings I acknowledge the obligations I am under for assistance during the progress of this Volume. To Mr. J. Winter Jones, Keeper of the Printed Books in the British Museum, who has frequently stood sponsor for me when desirous of visiting private libraries, and who has favored me with unusual facilities for consulting the collections under his charge, I am greatly indebted; Mr. W. B. Rye has afforded me much useful information; nor can I do otherwise than heartily acknowledge the general assistance and urbanity of Mr. G. Bullen, Mr. R. E. Graves, and all the officers in the British Museum, of whose services I have had to avail myself. To the Guildhall Library Committee I am obliged for permission to examine and copy from the City Records; and to Mr. Overall, Assistant Librarian, for his great courtesy under my numerous demands upon his time and attention: to the Court of the Mercers' Company, for access to their ancient Records, and to Mr. Barnes, their Clerk, I am under great obligations; also to the Rev. Dr. Hawtrey, Provost of Eton, for permission to take a facsimile from the rare "Fais du Jason" (the only copy in England), in the Library of that College. To M. Bossaert, of Bruges, I am deeply indebted for the communication of unpublished documents concerning Caxton, in the Archives of that City, and other information.

Nor do I owe less to assistance from private sources. My thanks are especially due to the Earl Spencer, for the loan of his unique copy of "Propositio Clarissimi Johannis Russell," and other works; to Mr. Bolton Corney, for the loan of many books, and the still more numerous and valuable suggestions of his well-stored bibliographical mind; to Mr. Tite, for his second edition of "Mirroure of the World;" and to numerous gentlemen whose assistance will be more appropriately acknowledged in the Second Volume. Mr. B. Beedham, of Kimbolton, has zealously assisted me in research, and supplied the material for many of the paragraphs in connection with the Probate Courts and the

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names of Caxton, Causton, &c. Mr. G. I. F. Tupper, to whose care all the tracings have been entrusted, has contributed also many most useful suggestions.

In conclusion, I can only regret that the treatment of so interesting a subject has not fallen into the hands of some one with more time and greater acquirements than I can ever hope to possess; but whatever errors or omissions may be discovered, and whatever the general verdict may be, I can affirm that truth, and truth alone, has been the aim of all my researches,—and especially so when in opposition to current opinions.

W. B.



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