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978-1-108-07383-7 - The Origin of Printing: In Two Essays

William Bowyer

Excerpt

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[ 1 ]

T H E  
O R I G I N  
O F  
P R I N T I N G.  
W I T H R E M A R K S.

**I**T was a constant opinion, delivered down by our historians, as hath been observed by Dr. MIDDLETON, that the ART OF PRINTING was introduced and first practised in England by WILLIAM CAXTON, a mercer and citizen of London; who, by his travels abroad, and a residence of many years in Holland, Flanders, and Germany, in the affairs of trade, had an opportunity of informing himself of the whole method and process of the art; and by the encouragement of the great, and particularly of the abbot of Westminster, first set up a press in that abbey, and began to print books soon after the year 1471.

This was the tradition of our writers; till a book, which had scarce been observed before the Restoration, was then taken notice of by the curious, with a date of its impression from Oxford, anno 1468, and

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was

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was considered immediately as a clear proof and monument of the exercise of printing in that university, several years before Caxton began to deal in it.

The book, which is in our public library, is a small volume of forty-one leaves in quarto, with this title: “*Exposicio Sancti Jeronimi in Simbolum Apostolorum ad Papam Laurentium:*” and at the end, “*Explicit exposicio, &c. Impressa Oxonie, & finita Anno Domini M,CCCC,LXVIII. xvii die Decembris.*”

The appearance of this book has robbed Caxton of a glory that he had long possessed, of being the author of printing to this kingdom, and Oxford ever since carried the honour of the first press. The only difficulty was, to account for the silence of history in an event so memorable, and the want of any memorial in the university itself, concerning the establishment of a new art amongst them, of such use and benefit to learning. But this likewise has been cleared up, by the discovery of a record, which had lain obscure and unknown at Lambeth house, in the Register of the See of Canterbury, and gives a narrative of the whole transaction, drawn up at the very time.

An account of this record was first published in a thin quarto volume, in English; with this title, “*The Original and Growth of PRINTING, collected out of History and the Records of this Kingdome: wherein is also demonstrated, that Printing appertaineth to the Prerogative Royal; and is a Flower of the Crown* of

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of England. By Richard Atkyns, esq.—Whitehall, April the 25, 1664. By order and appointment of the right honourable Mr. Secretary Morrice, let this be printed. THO. RYCAUT. London: Printed by John Streater, for the Author. 1664." 4to.

It sets forth in short [A], "That as soon as the art of printing made some noise in Europe, Thomas Bourchier, archbishop of Canterbury, moved the then king (Hen. VI.) to use all possible means for procuring a printing-mold (for so it 'twas there called) to be brought into this kingdom. The king (a good man, and much given to works of this nature) readily hearkened to the motion; and taking private advice, how to effect his design, concluded it could not be brought about without great secrecy, and a considerable sum of money given to such person or persons as would draw off some of the workmen of Harleim in Holland, where John Cuthenberg had newly invented it, and was himself personally at work. 'Twas resolved, that less than one thousand marks would not produce the desired effect; towards which sum the said archbishop presented the king three hundred marks. The money being now prepared, the management of the design was committed

[A] Dr. Middleton having given a very small extract from this book of Mr. Atkyns, it was thought proper to lay the substance of it more fully before the reader, in the words of Mr. Maittaire, *Annales Typographicae*, vol. i. p. 28.—Mr. Palmer has also printed a particular account of it, *Hist. of Printing*, p. 314. B.

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to Mr. Robert Turnour; who then was of the robes to the king, and a person most in favour with him of any of his condition. Mr. Turnour took to his assistance Mr. Caxton, a citizen of good abilities, who trading much into Holland, might be a creditable pretence, as well for his going, as stay in the Low Countries. Mr. Turnour was in disguise (his beard and hair shaven quite off); but Mr. Caxton appeared known and public. They, having received the said sum of one thousand marks, went first to Amsterdam, then to Leyden, not daring to enter Harleim itself; for the town was very jealous, having imprisoned and apprehended divers persons, who came from other parts for the same purpose. They staid, till they had spent the whole one thousand marks in gifts and expences: so as the king was fain to send five hundred marks more, Mr. Turnour having written to the king, that he had almost done his work; a bargain (as he said) being struck betwixt him and two Hollanders, for bringing off one of the under-workmen, whose name was Frederick Corfellis (or rather Corfellis), who late one night stoie from his fellows in disguise into a vessel prepared before for that purpose; and so the wind, favouring the design, brought him safe to London. 'Twas not thought so prudent to set him on work at London: but by the archbishop's means (who had been vice-chancellor and afterwards chancellor of the university of Oxon) Corfellis was carried with a guard to Oxon; which guard constantly watched to prevent Corfellis from any possible

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## O F P R I N T I N G. 5

ble escape, till he had made good his promise in teaching them how to print. So that at Oxford printing was first set up in England, which was before there was any printing-press or printer in France, Spain, Italy, or Germany (except the city of Mentz), which claims seniority, as to printing, even of Harleim itself, calling her city, “*Urbem Moguntinam artis typographicæ inventricem primam*,” though ’tis known to be otherwise; that city gaining that art by the brother of one of the workmen of Harleim, who had learnt it at home of his brother, and after set up for himself at Mentz [B]. This press at Oxon was at least ten years before there was any printing in Europe, except at Harleim and Mentz, where it was but new born. This press at Oxford was afterwards found inconvenient, to be the sole printing-place of England; as being too far from London and the sea. Whetefore the king set up a press at St. Alban’s, and another in the city of Westminster;

[B] This circumstance is urged as a great confirmation of the authority of this narration. The fact here asserted has been proved to be true, viz. that there were two brothers, JOHN GEINSFLEISCH senior and junior, who practised this art on separate wooden types, first at Harleim, and that the latter carried it to Mentz. This opinion is so contrary to what all the English historians relate, as Fabian, Hollingshed, Stow, Baker, &c. and Caxton himself, that the author must have had his information from some one who had it from the most authentic monuments. MEERMAN, vol. ii. p. 30.

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where they printed several books of *divinity* and *physic*; for the king (for reasons best known to himself and council) *permitted then no law-books to be printed*; nor did any printer exercise that art, but only such as were the king's sworn servants; *the king himself having the price and emolument for printing books*.—By this means the art grew so famous, that anno primo Ric. III. c. 9, when an act of parliament was made for restraint of aliens from using any handicrafts here (except as servants to natives), a special proviso was inserted, that strangers might bring in printed or written books, to sell at their pleasure, and exercise the art of printing here, notwithstanding that act: so in that space of forty or fifty years, by the indulgence of Edward IV, Edward V, Richard III, Henry VII, and Henry VIII, the English proved so good proficient in printing, and grew so numerous, as to furnish the kingdom with books; and so skilful, as to print them as well as any beyond the seas; as appears by the act 25 Henry VIII, cap. 15, which abrogates the said proviso for that reason. And it was further enacted in the said statute, that if any person bought foreign books bound, he should pay 6s. 8d. per book. And it was further provided and enacted, that in case the said printers or sellers of books were unreasonable in their prices, they should be moderated by the lord chancellor, lord treasurer, the two lords chief justices, or any two of them; who also had power to fine them 3s. 4d. for every book, whose price shall be enhanced.

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enhanced.—But when they were by charter corporated with *book-binders, book-sellers, and founders of letters*, 3 and 4 Philip and Mary, and called THE COMPANY OF STATIONERS—they kickt against the power that gave them life, &c.—Queen Elizabeth, the first year of her reign, grants by patent *the privilege of sole printing all books that touch or concern the common laws of England*, to Tortel a servant to her majesty, who kept it intire to his death; after him, to one Yest Weirt, another servant to her majesty; after him, to Weight and Norton; and after them, king James grants the same privilege to More, one of the signet; which grant continues to this day, &c.”

From the authority of this record, (says Dr. M.) all our later writers declare Corfellis to be the first printer in England; Mr. Anthony Wood, the learned Mr. Mattaire, Palmer, and one Bagford, an industrious man, who had published propofals for an History of Printing, and whose manuscript papers were communicated to me by my worthy and learned friend Mr. Baker: but it is strange that a piece so fabulous, and carrying such evident marks of forgery, could impose upon men so knowing and inquisitive.

For first; the fact is laid quite wrong as to time; near the end of Henry the Sixth's reign, in the very heat of the civil wars; when it is not credible that a prince, struggling for life as well as his crown, should have leisure or disposition to attend to a project that could hardly be thought of, much less executed, in times

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times of such calamity [C]. The printer, it is said, was graciously received by the king, made one of his sworn servants, and sent down to Oxford with a guard, &c. all which must have passed before the year MCCCCLIX: for Edward IV, was proclaimed in London, in the end of it, according to our computation, on the 4th of March, and crowned about the Midsummer following (see Caxton's Chronicle) [D]; and

[C] But this king, after he had laid the foundations for two of the greatest seminaries of literature in England, Eaton and King's College, Cambridge, bestowed his royal munificence to two colleges in Oxford, amidst all his troubles. MEERMAN, vol. ii, p. 32.

[D] Whatever Caxton's Chronicle may say, we have a much greater authority for fixing the beginning of king Edward's reign in MCCCCLX-I, i. e. a year later than Dr. Middleton does. The first instrument in Rymer's Conventiones, &c. in this king's reign, begins thus; "Mem. quod die Martis, decimo die Martii, anno regni regis Edw. primo." Now in the year MCCCCLX-I, the tenth of March fell upon a Tuesday; but in MCCCCLIX-LX, on a Monday. This mistake indeed of Dr. Middleton's is happily a confirmation of his own hypothesis. A transposition of a numeral in Caxton's Chronicle (Mar. MCCCCLIX for MCCCCLXI) made him antedate the reign of Edward IV; as the omission of x in the Expositio Hieronymi, printed at Oxford, is supposed to have made the public antedate the beginning of printing there. But that University needs no such support: though Dr. M. does; who left this mistake in the edition of his works, published in 1752, vol. iii. p. 231, 4to. though it had been pointed out, as above, in the Grubstreet Journal, N<sup>o</sup>. 273, March 20, 1735. B,

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## O F P R I N T I N G. 9

yet we have no fruit of all this labour and expence till ten years after, when the little book, described above, is supposed to have been published from that press.

Secondly ; the silence of Caxton, concerning a fact in which he is said to be a principal actor, is a sufficient confutation of it : for it was a constant custom with him, in the prefaces or conclusions of his works, to give an historical account of all his labours and transactions, as far as they concerned the publishing and printing of books. And, what is still stronger, in *The Continuation of the Polychronicon*, compiled by himself, and carried down to the end of Henry the Sixth's reign, he makes no mention of the expedition in quest of a Printer ; which he could not have omitted had it been true : whilst in the same book he takes notice of the invention and beginning of Printing in the city of Mentz [E] ; which I shall make some use of by and by.

There is a further circumstance in Caxton's history, that seems inconsistent with the record ; for we find  
him

[E] As Caxton makes no mention in his *Polychronicon* of his *expedition in quest of a Printer* ; so neither does he of his bringing the art first into England, which it is as much a wonder he should omit as the other. And as to his saying that *the invention of Printing was at Mentz*, he means, of printing on *fusile* separate types. In this he copies, as many others have, from the *Fasciculus temporum* ; a work

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him still beyond sea, about twelve years after the supposed transaction, “learning with great charge and trouble the art of printing;” (Recole of the Histories of Troye, in the end of the 2d and 3d books;) which he might have done with ease at home, if he had got Corfellis into his hands, as the record imports, so many years before: but he probably learnt it at Cologne, where he resided in 1471,

written in 1470, by WERNERUS ROLEVINCH DE LAER, a Carthusian Monk, a Ms. copy of which was in the library of Gerard Jo. Vossius (see lib. iii. *de Histor. Latin.* c. 6); and afterwards continued to the year 1474, when it was first printed at Cologne, *typis Arnoldi ter Huernen*. It was re-published in 1481, by HEINRICUS WIRCZBURG DE VACH, a Cluniac monk, without mentioning the name either of the printer or of the place of publication. We are told, indeed, in a colophon, that the book was published *sub Lodovico Gruerie Comite magnifico*; but, as the country whence this illustrious nobleman assumed his title was unknown to the learned editor of the *Origines Typographicæ*, it will be no easy task for an Englishman to discover it: nor is it of much consequence; as this edition, though somewhat enlarged, was miserably interpolated throughout, and particularly so in the account of the invention of Printing.—It is plain, however, that Caxton had one at least, or more probably both of these editions before him, when he wrote his continuation of the *Polychronicon*, as he mentions this work in his preface, and adopts the sentiments of its editor. (See MEERMAN, vol. ii. p. 37. and his *Documenta*, N<sup>o</sup> VII, XXIV, and XXV.) N.

(Recole,