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The Woodcutters of the Netherlands in the Fifteenth Century

Sir William Martin Conway (1856–1937), well known as an alpinist (his *The Alps from End to End* is also reissued in this series), was by profession an art historian. Supported by Henry Bradshaw of Cambridge University, he pursued his interest in the woodcuts and early printed books of the Low Countries, publishing this work in 1884. The study considers both prints and books, noting instances of the reuse of the same blocks in different works by different printers. The first part surveys the craftsmen (many of whom are anonymous) by town, and the second is a comprehensive catalogue of the cuts, with short descriptions, ordered according to their makers. The final part is a catalogue of the books in which the cuts appeared. Particular attention is paid to the work of Gheraert Leeu, the most prolific Dutch printer of his time, who worked in Gouda and subsequently in Antwerp.

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In Three Parts

WILLIAM MARTIN CONWAY



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THE WOODCUTTERS

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IN THE

FIFTEENTH CENTURY.

IN THREE PARTS :

- I. HISTORY OF THE WOODCUTTERS.
- II. CATALOGUE OF THE WOODCUTS.
- III. LIST OF THE BOOKS CONTAINING WOODCUTS.

BY

WILLIAM MARTIN CONWAY.

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INTRODUCTION.

IN order to explain with clearness and brevity the origin and scope of this book, and at the same time duly to acknowledge the help generously given by so many towards the work, of which the results are here compressed together, I intend to write in this place a short account of the various stages of my investigations upon the Woodcutters of the Netherlands.

At the beginning of the year 1879, I devoted some months, under the direction of Prof. Sidney Colvin, to the study of the early German and Flemish engravings preserved in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge. It seemed only natural to pass on from them to the woodcuts of the same period; and these being chiefly contained in printed books, the scene of operations was transferred to the University Library. I was thus for the first time brought in contact with Mr Henry Bradshaw. The subject I wished to study was one in which he, almost alone in Europe, had long taken great interest; and with a kindness and magnanimity, which I can never sufficiently acknowledge, he at once placed at my disposal all the stores of learning in matters connected with the early history of Printing, the extent of which is too well known to need emphasis from me. The first book he put into my hands was Leeu's *Dialogus Creaturarum moralisatus*. I examined, measured, and described each cut carefully and then passed on to other books, containing woodcuts, printed at the same press.

It has been long known that a common habit of early printers was to make use of the same wood-block for the

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illustration of many different books. The normal occurrence seems to have been for a printer to order from the woodcutter, usually employed by him, a set of cuts to serve as illustrations for some particular book, or set of books, and, after using them for that purpose, to turn them to account again and again as opportunity arose. At length the blocks were either worn out and laid aside, or they were sold to some other printer, to whose customers they would come with the freshness of novelty. Thus it became necessary to change the list of prints found in the fifteenth century books to a list of blocks cut in the fifteenth century, care being taken to note in the case of every block the various occasions of its use. The distribution of these blocks into classes (according to their styles) as the work of different woodcutters was thus rendered a matter of little difficulty; and so the passage backwards from prints to blocks, and from blocks to woodcutters, was complete.

At first I had intended to include the so-called Block-books in this investigation; but the problems connected with them are so different from those connected with the woodcuts in books printed with moveable types, that the force of circumstances prescribes an independent treatment for the two. The only Block-books, therefore, mentioned in this volume, are those of which the very blocks were cut up, and the pieces used as illustrations in books printed at a later date in the ordinary manner. Thus the limits of time naturally imposed upon me were from the date of the introduction of moveable types into the Netherlands down to the end of the year 1500. The limits of space, by no means arbitrarily chosen, were the boundaries of the existing kingdoms of Holland and Belgium. It is to be observed that this investigation was alone rendered possible by the life-long work which has produced two books, such as no other country can boast—the *Monuments typographiques des Pays-Bas au x^e siècle* of M. Holtrop, furnishing an exhaustive collection of specimens of all the known presses, and the equally exhaustive list of the books which is contained in Dr Campbell's *Annales de la Typographie Néerlandaise au x^v siècle*. Without the existence of such works no attempt could have been made, with any prospect of success, to attack the history of the

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woodcuts employed at the presses which have been the subject of such prolonged methodical research. Until Germany and France set themselves patiently to follow in the footsteps of Holtrop and Campbell, our acquaintance with early French and German printing, and therefore *à fortiori* with the early woodcut illustrations of French and German books, cannot but remain in a condition of vagueness and uncertainty.

After two months' work my list of the woodcuts (falling within these limits), contained in books in the Cambridge University Library, was complete. Throughout that time Mr Bradshaw had constantly helped me in every possible way, and I must here, once for all, assert that whatever of correctness, completeness, and thoroughness the following book may contain is chiefly due to him. By his advice and assistance I determined to undertake a thorough study of the subject. From Dr Campbell's *Annales de la Typographie Néerlandaise au xv^e siècle* we were enabled to form a list of all the books containing cuts, and of the libraries where copies of them could be seen. These libraries were visited in turn. First I went to Dublin, where a few very precious volumes are preserved in the Library of Trinity College. Then, in July 1879, I went to the Hague, the natural headquarters of an investigation of this kind. There Dr Campbell greeted me with open arms, and gave me every facility for work that it was possible to desire, besides placing at my disposal the valuable results of his own long experience. At Haarlem, Amsterdam, and Deventer I was received with equal kindness. At Utrecht Professor Doedes willingly allowed me access to the rare volumes, of which he is so worthy a possessor, and at Gouda M. Koemans was similarly generous. I then went to Alkmaar, hoping to find in the possession of a gentleman there the unique copy (mentioned in the *Annales*) of a Schoonhoven *Spiegel der volmaetheyt*. The gentleman was with difficulty identified as the local saddler, who indignantly repudiated the idea that he was the possessor of any books whatever, except his ledger and a Bible. The book in question, as I afterwards learnt, had passed into other hands, and had been bought by Mr Bradshaw at the Van der Willigen sale at Amsterdam in 1875. On my return I saw it in his rooms.

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The next places visited in turn were Bremen, Hamburg, Lübeck, and Wolfenbüttel, at all of which the books required were forthcoming. At Helmstadt I was less fortunate; for, though the Accursius Pisanus I wanted was presently found, the single woodcut it should have contained proved to have been cut out. At Berlin, Dr Lippmann, with his usual courtesy to foreign students, gave me every possible assistance in my work.

One of the things I was most anxious to see was the "*Figures gravées en bois de la vie de Jésus-Christ*" (CA. 746). From the descriptions of Murr and Heineken, referred to by Dr Campbell, it seemed possible that these *Figures* might prove to be leaves of some lost Block-book, though the cuts were well known as constantly used by Gerard Leeu, and altogether in the style of one of the woodcutters employed by him. The last place where they were recorded to have been seen was the Library of the suppressed University of Altorf. No one could tell me whither that Library had been transferred, until, by chance, I met a lady at Dresden, who informed me that her father was a student at Altorf, at the very time the University was suppressed, and that he was obliged to go to Erlangen to complete his studies. So to Erlangen I at once went, arriving there on a winter's afternoon, five minutes before the hour for closing the Library. I hurried from the station, leaving my luggage to look after itself, rushed, with somewhat unseemly haste, into the room of the excellent librarian, Dr Zucker, and eagerly enquired whether the sheets, for which I had so long been searching, were under his charge. He quickly recognised and laid his hand upon what I wanted, and set it aside for examination on the following day. It was with a feeling of satisfaction and relief that I went out and watched, from the hill-slopes behind the town, the sun set below the edge of the wide snow-clad plain, out of which the towers of Nürnberg arose like ghosts in the misty distance.

From Erlangen I travelled to Nürnberg, and from Nürnberg to Munich, and this formed the southernmost limit of my bibliographical tour. Both at Munich, Darmstadt, and Frankfurt I met with the same kind treatment as elsewhere,

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and the fates were still propitious, though they were not long to remain so. At Coblenz only one of the books wanted was forthcoming; at Trier it was impossible to lay hands upon any of the volumes in my list; at Cöln the same ill-luck awaited me, both in the Town Archives and in the Catholic Gymnasium. It was not till I reached Brussels that the tide of fortune turned, and there I had not fortune to thank, so much as the presiding genius of M. Ruelens, who forwarded my wishes with the readiest and most competent help. To M. Hymans the Keeper of the Prints I am likewise indebted for several valuable hints. In the same town M. Alphonse Willems was kind enough to give me access to his books, and M. Olivier supplied me with information on one or two points where information was of real value. At Louvain, notwithstanding the willingness of the good Librarian to assist me in every way, I was only partially successful in finding the books wanted. At Ghent, on the other hand, M. Ferd. Vander Haeghen not only found all the books in the University Library for which I asked, but some of which I had not heard, and he procured for me the opportunity of studying at leisure a number of volumes in the valuable Vergauwen collection, since dispersed. The only library of importance in Holland or Belgium which I was not able to see was that of the Duc d'Arenberg. It is understood to be for the present (since the death of the late Duke) packed away in boxes and absolutely inaccessible.

After a brief visit to England, early in 1880, I continued my journey, going first of all to Paris. M. Léopold Delisle and M. Thierry of the Bibliothèque Nationale showed me the courtesy which has become traditional in all parts of that institution, and makes work there particularly pleasant. From Paris I went to Cambrai, and thence to Mons to see the unique copy of the *Exercitium* Block-book. A few more days were spent in Belgium and then another three weeks in the Royal Library at the Hague, where Dr Campbell was, if possible, kinder and more helpful than ever. This brought my labours on the Continent to an end. In England there remained only the Library of the British Museum, after a series of visits to which I returned to Cambridge and once more went through

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the books in the University Library, revising, by the light of a larger experience, the notes which had been taken there before. Between the beginning of April and the end of July, 1880, the results of my work were written down at Cambridge, with the constant help of Mr Bradshaw, as referee upon all points of difficulty connected with the bibliography of the subject; and the book took very much the form in which it now appears. No part of it however saw the light for some year and a half, and then portions of Part I. appeared as articles in several consecutive numbers of the *Bibliographer* (Lond. 1882).

Finally, by the liberality of the Syndics of the University Press, the missing link in the chain is supplied, and my book has been enabled to see the light. In passing the sheets through the press Mr Bradshaw has again been my good genius, ever ready with his sympathy and with large and precious sacrifices of his time. Dr Campbell has likewise been most kind in reading the proofs for me, and Mr Harold Lafone, of Trinity College, Cambridge, has done me a similar service so far as Part I. is concerned. I have also to thank Mr Karl Pearson for suggestions which have led to valuable results.

It remains, in order to render more intelligible the general course of development of the art of Woodcutting during the period dealt with in the following chapters, and to show more precisely the scope of the present work, to make a few general remarks at this point upon the whole subject.

At the time when the Block-books were printed the style of woodcutting was very simple. It consisted in rendering with pure outline the designs drawn upon the wood. The prints were intended to be coloured, and the outlines were mere guides for the illuminator. Hardly any shade hatchings were introduced, but the main lines were left free and cut with great care and often with much real art. When moveable types came into use in the Netherlands, the first books printed by means of them were not illustrated, if we leave out of account such an exceptional work as the *Speculum*. When however, after the year 1475, woodcuts began to make their way, as illustrations, into printed books, they

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were at first cut in the same style as the woodcuts of the Block-books. This school of pure line work is represented best by the Utrecht and First Gouda Woodcutters. The Second Gouda Cutter inaugurated what we may call the Transitional School, which covered approximately the years 1482—1490. Its style still lays much stress upon the outlines but employs shade hatchings in considerable quantity. The most characteristic worker belonging to it was the Haarlem Cutter, and his influence was felt all over the country. He retained something of the *naïveté* of the earlier workmen, at the same time introducing more of the pictorial element into his cuts. In the year 1491 French woodcuts found their way into the Netherlands, and they swiftly produced a revolution in the art. The characteristic quality of the French cuts is the large masses of delicately cut shade lines which they contain. The workmen of the Low Countries, finding these foreign cuts rapidly becoming popular, endeavoured to imitate them, but without bestowing upon their work that care, by which alone any semblance of French delicacy could be attained. From the year 1490 onwards, Dutch and Flemish cuts always contain large masses of clumsily cut shade. The outlines are rude; the old childishness is gone; thus the last decade of the 15th century is a decade of decline. Such is briefly the course of the art as described in the following work.

It seemed best to divide the book into three parts, not only because that was the most natural arrangement—the Woodcutter, the Woodcuts, and the Printer receiving prominence in turn—but also because the volume is more likely in this form to be of service to students of different kinds. Those interested in the general history of Art will find in Part I. what little pabulum there is for them. To students of the early history of Printing and Woodcutting Part II. will be more useful; whilst by a reference to Part III., anyone can give to the books therein mentioned, to which he may have access, a more extended utility, because he will be able to see what schools and styles of woodcutting are represented by the prints contained in them. Lastly, the student of Iconography will have little difficulty in finding references to examples of particular subjects, seeing that the

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cuts in Part II. naturally fall into a few series, the contents of each being almost compassable at a glance.

It will be observed that in order to facilitate reference from one part of the book to another, the same numbering is common to the sections of Parts I. and II., so that it is easy to pass at once from the description of the style of any particular artist to the list of the cuts made by him, or *vice versa*.

Whatever explanation is necessary for understanding the details of the method of the arrangement of the several Parts will be found at the beginning of each.

The discovery of the Ghent fragments at the dispersal of the Vergauwen Collection at the beginning of the present month was too important to be passed over in silence. The results of an examination of them have, therefore, been thrown into an Appendix.

W. M. C.

CAMBRIDGE,
30 April, 1884.

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WOODCUTTERS OF THE
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PART I.

HISTORY OF THE WOODCUTTERS.

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ON THE METHOD ADOPTED IN THE HISTORY.

The general scope of the work has been explained in the Introduction, and the nature of the subdivision into Sections will be found described in the note prefixed to the Catalogue (Part II., page 194). In a strict chronological arrangement, the sections would have followed one another in accordance with the date of the first rise or appearance of each particular Woodcutter; but any rigid adherence to such a plan would have prevented an intelligible treatment of the subject. While following broadly the order of time, the several workmen, or schools of workmen, have been brought together by grouping the Sections into Chapters, so that the rise, development, and decay, of a local school of woodcutting may be followed by the reader without difficulty. First come the Block-books, which are here treated only as affording materials for the later printer who wished to illustrate his books (Ch. I.). Then come the workers in pure line (Ch. II.). Then, linking closely on to these last, come the workmen employed by Gerard Leeu at Gouda and Antwerp; the Haarlem workman and his school, also nearly connected with Leeu; and the foreign woodcuts introduced by Leeu from Germany and France (Ch. IV., V.). Four Chapters are then devoted successively to the work produced at Zwolle (Ch. VI.), at Delft (Ch. VII.), in Brabant (at Brussels and Louvain, Ch. VIII.), and at a group of places in Holland (Gouda, Deventer, Leyden, and Schoonhoven, Ch. IX.); and the History is closed with a Chapter on the late Antwerp woodcuts which belong almost wholly to the last decade of the century (Ch. X.). The diagrams enumerated in Sect. 38 have not been thought of sufficient importance to require any discussion in the History. What concerns the productions of Arend de Keyser's woodcutter at Ghent, brought to light since the following sheets were printed, will be found in the Appendix (pages 349—359).