THE QUINCENTENARY OF PRINTING

Herbert L. Stewart

At that very time, while the fanatical Moslem were plundering the churches and palaces of Constantinople, breaking in pieces Grecian sculptures and giving to the flames piles of Grecian eloquence, a few humble German artisans, who little knew that they were calling into existence a power far mightier than that of the victorious Sultan, were busied in cutting and setting the first types. The University of Glasgow came into existence just in time to witness the disappearance of the last trace of the Roman Empire, and to witness the publication of the earliest printed book.—

Macaulay

THE passage prefixed to this article is from a memorable rectorial address delivered by Macaulay when he became Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow, nearly one hundred years ago. It was memorable alike for those dazzling effects of rhetoric in which the speaker's talent has seldom been equalled, and for those startling inadequacies or exaggerations of thought which the listener must forget if rhetorical glory is to be enjoyed. To read that address, a century later, is an exercise in both critical and appreciative faculties. Some cannot make the needful allowance for rhetoric—just as some cannot enjoy a novel (because of the haunting consciousness that "none of these things ever happened")—and they are indeed unfortunate. Some do not realize that any such allowance has to be made, and they are more unfortunate still.

All things considered, including its disparagement by historical pedants, it was a great rectorial. In it the four hundred years of life which the University of Glasgow had then known were surveyed and summed up, with the opening of each successive century as a point for reflective retrospect and prospect. Naturally, for a bookman, the invention of printing, almost contemporaneous with the establishment of the University of Glasgow, was the event of significance with which to begin. Yet another century has now passed. The development in the world of printed books since 1849 has been not less

notable than that of any secular period which preceded. To keep, in reminiscent thought, this quincentenary, as the quatercentenary was marked that afternoon by the Lord Rector in Glasgow, is now a manifest obligation of the bookman.

I.

Like the rival cities which disputed the title of "Homer's birthplace", Germans and Dutch have fought each other's claim to have given the world its first printer. I shall not here add even a paragraph to the volumes of argument as to whether the Dutch Haarlem was indeed the earlier scene of that new art, which enterprizing German visitors observed there and quickly reproduced with technical improvement at their own city of Mentz. How far does the inventor surpass him who merely develops another's invention! Thus runs the patriotic Dutch comment on pretensions so long acknowledged by the world for Gutenberg rather than for Coster. In Holland many a statue, many a medal, even an occasional holiday may still be noted to support what German historians contemptuously dismiss as "the Coster legend". At least, such was the situation until very lately; how it may have been altered since the Dutch have had to take orders not from The Hague but from Berlin, it would be rash for a foreigner to guess. In general, woe to the Hollander who disputes a German claim to *anything* now! Since historical like all other questions must be answered, wherever the swastika floats, not by the old rules of evidence but by the new rule of extolling Germans as in every respect the world's *Herrenvolk*, the circulation of the claim for Coster may well be forbidden. I am writing, however, in a country where the earlier concept of truth still prevails, and hence recognize a real dispute as to whether the first printing, in our modern sense of that term, was done in Germany or in Holland. It is noted here, however, merely in passing. *Non nostri est tantas componere lites.*

The idea of multiplying copies from a manuscript by cutting letters in relief upon a wooden slab, inking them over and taking impressions upon some such material as paper, is not of either German or Dutch, but of Chinese origin. Europeans may have bethought themselves of it—they probably did—independently; but the "block-book" was being produced in China centuries before we find any trace of it in Europe. Curious

indeed to the modern eye is a page from one of those "block-books". They still remain to show how, in the later Middle Ages, a crude effort was made to provide some sort of manual of religious instruction for persons to whom the work of an expensive copyist was quite inaccessible.

The block-book was meant not exclusively, though most frequently, to serve a devotional purpose. A famous example was the authoritative Latin grammar of the Middle Ages, *Donatus de octibus partibus orationis*. Another, entitled *The Nine Champions*, is descriptive of three classical and three romantic as well as three biblical heroes. Here and there one finds even an astrological contribution so printed. But the commanding interest was to promote piety, and the religious block-book was always profusely illustrated with pictures of sacred persons or scenes: in such a treatise as the *Biblia Pauperum*, or "Bible of the Poor", presenting selected biblical situations, the picture on each page is central, and the printed words serve as comments upon it. Merry wit has been expended on the anachronisms—on Gideon and David, Solomon and Elijah in the dress, or the armour, or the general setting known to the artist from the 12th or 13th century scene of his own life. But such pictures served a purpose more important to those who planned and paid for them than mere correctness of historical imagination.

Carlyle once said that the art of writing was man's supreme achievement, and that from this the art of printing was "an inevitable and comparatively insignificant corollary". Yet like the law of gravitation, the law of circulation of the blood, and many another triumph of man's searching mind, the use of moveable type—so obvious once it has been suggested—was very slow to suggest itself. It took at least two millennia of European effort in literature for this "corollary" of the writer's art to appear, after the foundation principle had been laid. So absurdly simple, too, was the idea of cutting a separate type for each letter of the alphabet, that after use in printing one page the types might be redistributed and in new combinations might form any number of other pages! The whole secret of rapid and inexpensive multiplication of copies lay there.

A certain Chinese smith is said to have bethought himself of this device centuries before it was tried in Europe, and to have experimented with moveable type of burnt clay. But he never went beyond an initial experiment. How could he, in view of

the enormous multiplicity of Chinese characters? Little more than a score of easily formed letters in the Roman alphabet supply every linguistic need of the western countries, so that here was the manifest opportunity for moveable type.

II.

For the English-speaking world special interest belongs to the first printing in England, and on this quincentenary we salute the shade of William Caxton.

Over thirty years had passed since the new device had first been tried on the continent, and during that period presses had been successively set up at such German centres as Strasburg, Nuremberg, Cologne, in Italy at Rome and Naples, Florence and Venice. These had been producing Bibles and Psalters, catechisms, service books, such classical texts as Cicero's *Philippics* and *De Oratore*, or the work of Lactantius so often applauded as "the Christian Cicero". But in this respect England still lagged behind the continental pattern. Was it through lack of enterprize? Or was it by reason of the insular contempt which, as George Gissing has told us, makes an Englishman negligent of all that originates "abroad"? Anyhow, it was not until 1477 that the first printing press was set up in England. It was set up by William Caxton, who had lived much abroad, with watchful and discerning eye.

He had left Kentshire about the time when White Rose and Red Rose began to quarrel, and the whole thirty years of that desolating conflict had been spent by him in Flanders at the quiet business of a dealer in dry goods. Therein he had attained a modest prosperity. He had indeed become Governor of the English "Gild of Merchant Adventurers", but this had not made him blind to activities other than those of commerce. Unlike Sir Isaac Harman, in Mr. Wells's romance, he had not developed into "a man of unpretentious acquisitiveness...distracted by no aesthetic or intellectual interests". Rather, like Montaigne, he was ever wearied by "importunity of mind". If business was his vocation, literature had long been his avocation, and he was thrilled by the new contrivance for rapid copying of precious manuscripts.

Caxton had himself been a copyist, in the service of the Duchess of Burgundy, and when he saw the mechanical aid which Colard Mansion had brought to Bruges, his first thought was of the speed with which this might further the production of

the *Tales of Troy* on which he was at work. When the *Tales* appeared, first product of the printing press on English soil, the preface had this memorable paragraph:

> Forasmuch as in the writing of the same my pen is worn, my hand weary and not steadfast, mine eyes dimmed with over much looking on the white paper, and my courage not so prone and ready to labour as it hath been, and that age creepeth on me daily and feebleth all the body, and also because I have promised to divers gentlemen and to my friends to address to them as hastily as I might the said book, therefore I have practised and learned at my great charge and dispense to ordain this said book in print after the manner and form as ye may see, and is not written with pen and ink as other books be, to the end that every man may have them at once, for all the books of this story here emprynted as ye see were begun in one day and also finished in one day.

But though his printing thus began as relief to the exhaustion of a copyist, Caxton soon bethought himself that the new art had potentialities far wider. He saw a great prospect for translations, and in his advancing years he translated continuously for his own press. It has been estimated that in the aggregate not fewer than 4,000 of his printed pages were his own composition, rendering into English from other languages. What problems that task set him, when his mother tongue was itself so uncertain! He was at once entertained and puzzled by the difficulty of choosing words. Of this he has left us a reminiscent anecdote:

> "Our language now used varieth far from that which was used and spoken when I was born... Common English that is spoken in one shire varieth from another so much 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 there tarried at Foreland, and went on land for to refresh them. And one of them, named Sheffield, a mercer, came into a 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, but she understood him not. And then at last another said he would have *eyren*, then the good wife said 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.

Caxton's translations are thus a valuable source for the comparative philologist: they exhibit the language in the late fifteenth century as used by one critically conscious of the

changes it is fast undergoing, and keen above all to keep the sense generally intelligible.

With interest too, of another sort, one reads this first English printer's advertisements. Not without consequence for his later literary pursuits had Caxton learned to make a fortune in business: in literature as in dry goods he would produce for customers what they most wanted—tales of chivalry for knights, service books for priests, sermons for preachers. But he had also in mind, within limits of the practicable, to educate public taste, suggesting to readers (as in a good publisher's catalogue of our own time) what they *should* want—for example, the poetry of Lydgate or Gower, and, above all, the immortal *Canterbury Tales*.

What sort of "reading public", as we should now describe it, did Caxton thus serve? And Caxton's contemporaries in printing?

It has often been remarked that the fifteenth century was barren in literature, but exceptionally productive in the transcription of books. The *Paston Letters* indicate in England during the reigns of Henry VI and Edward IV a considerable improvement at least upon the cultural level of the time of Richard II. Members of the Paston family could write to one another with grammatical correctness: they took a vivacious interest in events outside the Paston circle; they intersperse their correspondence with Latin phrases, and even occasionally with Latin verse, well meant though ill constructed, and the exchange of an Ovid is among the courtesies of their household intercourse. King's College, Cambridge, Eton School, Lincoln and Magdalen Colleges, Oxford, are foundations of the middle fifteenth century which may be cited in evidence of a continuing zeal for learning. But there is no work of English literature in that century comparable to the work of Chaucer or Wycliffe in the century previous, or to that of More and Sidney in the century to come.

Against feeble literary competitors, Italy then held the chief distinction in Europe. Not indeed for productive work in the vernacular, continuing the glories of the great fourteenth century trio—Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio! It was for zeal with which collectors brought together, expositors interpreted, and enthusiasts imitated those classical models which they had begun to find "mouldering in the repositories of convents". Of such, for example, had been Poggio Bracciolini, so conspicuous in literary circles of the first half of the fifteenth century

that the time in which he lived has been called by historians of literature "The Age of Poggio". Never surely, not even in pre-Tractarian England, among the clergy whose title to a bishopric was the successful editing of a Greek play, do we find such absorption of an ecclesiastical mind in the pursuits of pure scholarship. Poggio indeed was not a priest, but he was Secretary to the Roman Curia throughout the intensely exciting years of struggle between pope and anti-pope, Church Council and Hussite heretics, Western Orthodoxy and Eastern Schism. There is no evidence that any of these were exciting to him, but there is abundant proof that wherever the formal duties of his Secretaryship carried him, even at Constance when controversy was fiercest, he would steal away as often as possible to ransack a convent library for manuscripts of Lucretius, of Quintilian, of Vitruvius, of Ammianus Marcellinus. If other methods failed, he would bribe a monk to pillage for him even the religious house, for he was as destitute of scruple as an antiquary or a stamp-collector among those unaware of the value of their treasures. His letters tell of his success, due sometimes to a carefully planned method, sometimes to sheer good luck. It was service to his Age which indeed merited an enduring memorial; for, in the years just before the invention of printing, Poggio had made available for the first time, in copies executed by his own hand from a complete manuscript, not a few great works of classical antiquity of which only dubious fragments had before been known.

What a means was furnished by the great invention for progress in this field at a speed previously unimagined!

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As one indulges such reminiscent mood, there are certain questions very different from those of merely antiquarian interest which may well—just now—suggest themselves.

Has this great invention, with such obvious possibilities, proved as fruitful as there was reason to expect? Or has this branch of the tree of knowledge, as Byron said about the tree of knowledge in general, failed to fulfil its promise? One's mind goes back to a period towards the close of the fifteenth century, about as far distant from the Wars of the Roses as our period is distant from the First World War. Suppose, for example, a date about 1480, when William Caxton's printing press at Westminster had begun to turn out great books in considerable editions, at a price comparatively low, for the English public.

Must not many an onlooker, in middle or later life, as he watched this new instrument of popular education at work, have conceived a new hopefulness? I don't mean such an onlooker as Caxton's occasional visitor Richard, Duke of Gloucester, soon to be known as King Richard III, whose intellectual curiosity led him often to drop in at the printing house—the "Red Pale" close by the Almonry, conspicuous for its heraldic shield with a red bar down the middle. One cannot suppose that sinister mind to have been occupied with thoughts of public improvement, though so keen a calculating intelligence may well have guessed a coming popular danger to such as himself. But, of those who wished well rather than ill for mankind, the more sanguine must surely have hoped that once the "common people" had time to enter into the inheritance of knowledge so long monopolised by a few, no such senseless horror as the fight between White Rose and Red Rose, to determine which set of butchering barons should exploit the other set, would be again possible. How naive that dream now seems! What was it that spoiled it? Was it on some miscalculation about human nature, and its capacity to be educated, that the dreamer went wrong? Or was the printing press mishandled?

Our generation should reflect on these challenging queries. For we have seen the first appearance of an instrument of popular education with whose possibilities only those of printing are comparable. That there is in certain respects such promise in radio, at least as an agency of rapid popular appeal, beyond any that resided five centuries back in the printing press, no one can doubt. That it may be marred no less in the development, is more painfully obvious every day.

Will it be rescued in time?