

Roger Burford Mason

Buying A Press

There was a time when I kept seeing a dead man. He was an old man I knew briefly. I bought a printing press from him. He wasn't really dead. Just someone who had stopped living. Someone whose life was in the before, not in the now.

In the early seventies I got interested in printing. How is a long story, but I liked doing it. Putting the individual letters together by hand. Making up lines of type and then fixing them up in the printing press so they'd print. The ink smelt good too. It was therapeutic to go into the shed in the garden behind the house after school and do some printing. At first I just did some things for friends—letterheads, business cards, club cards—but soon I was doing more and more. Enjoying it, and making a little money at a time when things were tight.

One day my wife pointed out an advertisement in the local paper. Someone had a printing press to sell. The one I used was a lightweight hand-operated press. It worked O.K., but doing more and more jobs, I thought I would do better work on a better press. I rang the number and after a while a man answered it. I took his address and arranged to go and see the press straight away.

The house I went to was on the other side of town, in a street I'd never been in before. The houses were all small, solid, semi-detached houses with pebbledash and steel windows. Typically 1930s. The front door was dark green, the paint faded and flaking.

I rang the doorbell. Away at the back of the house I heard it jangle but nothing happened. No one came. I rang it again. After a moment, a small shape, indistinct behind the frosted glass in the door, came slowly towards me. Like something moving through water. The door chain rattled and the lock was drawn.

Inside, the house was fading but not untidy. It smelt of old age, dryness. You could tell at once that the old man lived alone. A lot of old people who live alone keep things they'd have thrown away once.

Old newspapers, old letters, calendars, magazines, clothes they don't wear. It was like that. He led me into the kitchen. To the evidence of his solitariness. A single cup, saucer and plate in the drainer, with a knife and a spoon. There was one kitchen chair at the table and a pair of faded tartan slippers in front of the kitchen stove.

The door into the backyard stuck when he tried to open it. He tried several times but it wouldn't budge. I offered to help but either he didn't hear me, or he ignored me. The door rattled several times as he pulled at it, and at last it burst open. He held it for me and we went out.

Across the yard was a low wooden shed with a tar paper roof. The door was held shut with a wooden peg through a rusty hasp and staple. He took the peg out and stuck it in a knot hole not to lose it. Inside the shed it was gloomy and smelt of wood and oil and old things. There was a window covered in cobwebs and dust and a work bench against the wall. An upright bicycle leaned against it, covered in dust and a fine skin of rust. In the corner I could make out an old lawnmower covered with sacks. There were rusty tools hanging on nails on the wall.

"You'll have to lift it up," he said.

He nudged a nondescript shape on the floor with his foot. It was tented with yellow newspaper. His foot knocked a sheet off it and I could see cast iron, black and dull with lack of use.

"Put it up on the bench," he said.

He wheeled the bicycle along to get in at the bench, and pushed some of the clutter to the back. I knelt and put the sheets of newspaper aside.

The press was a solid iron hand press, the kind they started apprentices working on in printing shops at the turn of the century. It was about the size of a small television set. A large circular ink plate, a handle with the gold scrollwork still visible, connecting rods, decayed rubber rollers for the ink. I ran my hand over it to wipe some of the dust away. It was magnificent. Real late Victorian cast ironwork. Beautifully engineered and painted with fine gold lines which led to swelling acanthus leaves.

I lifted it onto the work bench, its weight dead in my hands.

"You'll need to get the rollers renewed," he said.

I nodded.

"It hasn't been used for above twenty years. I used to do a lot once upon a time, but when the missus died I lost interest. I didn't need the money and it wasn't the same any more."

He dabbed at it with a thin and bony hand. Under his finger, as he rubbed idly, gold leaves emerged from the oil and dust.

"There," he said. "Look at that."

Beneath the leaves there were thin gold letters.

Excelsior
Model No. 4

And beneath the letters, an oval brass plate stamped 1888.

"Nearly a hundred years old," he said proudly. "And good for another hundred, no trouble."

I said it would look wonderful, cleaned up and renovated.

"I used to come in here after work," he said. "I'd wash and change and have a cup of tea. Then I'd come out and do an hour or so. She'd call me in for my dinner and I'd bring in whatever I was working on. She took an interest in it. Liked to see what I was doing and how it turned out. She always wanted to see the first thing each time. She'd cock her head on one side and look at it. She could tell me if it was all straight. If it balanced nicely. She had a good eye."

He'd found a piece of cloth and was rubbing at the dust and oil more systematically.

"After she died it wasn't the same. I'd no one to share it with. I couldn't go in for my dinner and take her a piece in to look at."

Slowly the iron was beginning to take on a lustre under his cloth.

"We'd talk about it while we were eating and she'd give me her advice. She was rarely wrong about things like that."

He paused in his rubbing to look at his handiwork.

"There," he said, pleased. "A bit more elbow grease and she'll be done. Just need to rub down the ink plate with emery paper to get it clean and shining. And get new rollers. Then you're away."

I said you could already see how the original look was coming back to it.

"It's funny though," he continued. "She never wanted to learn how to do it herself. Just wanted to see what I was doing. I don't think she ever came in here while I was actually working. Only to say dinner was ready or something like that. She never stopped to watch."

He threw the cloth to the back of the work bench and unhooked the rollers. They were pitted and cracked, like mud in hot weather.

"I bought this in 1932," he said. "From an old chap kept a printing shop over town. He told me how all the apprentices in the shop got their start on it. That's how they learnt the trade in those days. Banging the handle of this thing all day. They'd print thousands of impressions a week. Just on this. And make the boss good money. They were expected to pay their way after the first few days, the apprentices. Don't suppose above one or two of them ever noticed what it looked like. It was their tyrant. Their master."

He put the rollers down on the bench beside the press.

"Are you going to take it? There's lots of bits and pieces go with it you can have. Type. Ink. Bits and pieces."

I paid him in cash. On the kitchen table. He didn't touch or check the money while I was there but he watched me closely as I counted the notes out. I said I couldn't take it straight away because I'd come on my bicycle, so I arranged to call back the next day in my car.

I went back to the house the following afternoon. It was about four o'clock and the old man was drinking tea at the kitchen table. There were some slices of bread in a wrapper on the table, and an opened can of sardines. Though he was drinking his tea in a cup without a saucer, he gave me both. It was delicate china. The cup rang when I stirred the tea.

Once I had my tea he left the room and went towards the front of the house. I heard him opening doors and drawers in the front room. When he came back he put a scrap book in front of me.

"My sample book," he said. "Have a look. See what you think."

The book was fat and heavy with pages and pages of printed ephemera pasted in it. The first dated from the late thirties, the most recent the early fifties. Some of the pages were loose, falling out. Others were stuffed with oversize sheets folded into them. They were all torn, snagged, creased and yellowing with age. But the printing was really good. Letterheads. Billheads. Business cards. Invitations. Wedding stationery. Cleanly designed and printed. Stylish.

He leaned over the table and turned the pages to the back of the book.

"Look at these."

The last several pages were Christmas cards. Quotations and poems about Christmas, illustrated with crude but effective linocuts.

"I liked doing them," he said.

"They're very good," I said.

They were too. A mixture of rough-cut pictures and clean, neat printing. Anyone would have been pleased to get one in the post.

"We did one every year from the time I got the press till she died," he said. "She drew the pictures and I cut them out and printed them. They aren't very good, but people seemed to like getting them."

I said I would have been very glad to have got one at Christmas. That I thought they were just what it was about. Putting yourself into the gifts you gave people.

"You can take the book too," he said. "With everything else."

For a moment I was surprised. I said I couldn't. I was sure he'd want to keep them. A souvenir. A wonderful record of the good things he had once done.

"I don't want to keep it," he said. And then after a moment. "That's all done now."

I was still reluctant but he was adamant I should take it.

"If you don't I'll throw it out one of these days."

I said that would be awful. That it was an important document. A record of part of his life. As interesting as a diary.

"Ah, well," he said when I had finished protesting. "Maybe. But that's all past now."

It took some time to fix the press up. Cleaning it properly was no problem. Beneath the dust and oil it was in almost perfect condition. Once it was cleaned it looked . . . magnificent, but getting the rubber rollers renovated took almost a month. Eventually they came back from the moulders and I got started.

I thought the old man might like to see my first piece of printing on the press. It was a dance ticket. I wasn't anything special as a designer, but I printed cleanly and carefully, and for what it was, it was a good job.

I drove round to his house and knocked on the front door. At the back of the house the bell in the kitchen jangled. I waited, expecting to see his watery shape come slowly towards the door but nothing happened. I rang the bell again. After a few minutes I went through the side gate and round to the back of the house. I knocked on the back door. I tried the handle. I went to the shed to see if he was out there, but the wooden peg was in the hasp and staple. Although he hadn't said so, I had got the impression that he didn't go out much. Puzzled, I wrote a short note on the back of the dance ticket and slipped it through the letterbox.

It was as I was driving away that I thought I saw him. In my wing mirror. He seemed to be standing on the pavement in front of his house. I stopped the car and looked back over my shoulder but there was nothing, no one, there in the street. Just a shadow or something from a tree in someone's front garden.

Some time later I had a letter about him from his son. It was very brief. The old man had been ill and had become very weak. He had gone into the old people's home. I knew where it was; I'd worked there one summer holiday when I was a student learning how to be a teacher.

I thought he might like me to visit him. I bought some fruit to take to him, and made up a collection of the printing jobs I'd been doing. The

afternoon was warm and sunny and I walked round to the home. It was a gaunt, grey stone building which stood at the top of a low rise which people in the town called The Hill. It had once been the town Poor House and something of the same air still hung over it, although they tried to brighten it up with paint and flowers and nice furniture and curtains.

He was in the men's ward. It was on the ground floor looking over the gardens toward the rooftops of the town. I found the nurse in charge and told her who I'd come to see. She said she'd go and tell him. I waited by the desk, looking through into the long dayroom where the old men sat in high-backed chairs. One or two were reading or smoking pipes or cigarettes, but most of them were sitting quite still, looking out of the windows into the distance. As if something interesting was happening far away that they needed to concentrate on.

The nurse came back. She was sorry, she said, but he didn't want to see me. I said was she sure she'd told him exactly who I was, my connection, and she said he knew, remembered, but didn't want to see me. I left the fruit and the envelope of printing samples and walked home, disappointed.

I really would have liked to keep in touch with the old man. I had enjoyed talking to him those times, and we had this shared interest in printing, but though I tried again he wouldn't see me. Even so, I posted him a few bits and pieces of my printing now and then, hoping he'd enjoy seeing it.

One afternoon I'd driven over to the kindergarten to pick up my son. He went afternoons only and we took it in turns to go and collect him. This afternoon he came running out with a painting—a blue cat with saucer eyes and a corkscrew tail—talking nineteen to the dozen. I settled him in his car seat in the back and clipped on my own seat belt. Looking in the rearview mirror as I pulled away from the kerb, I thought I saw the old man watching us. I stopped to check over my shoulder, through the back window, but it wasn't anybody I knew. There was a West Indian woman in the street behind us, talking to another mother. That was all.

The next morning there was a letter from the old man's son. Thanking me for sending stuff to his father, but asking me to stop. His father didn't want to receive any more printing from me. Yours faithfully.

I was disappointed but I stopped. My wife said that maybe he was tired. That he just wanted to slough off all of his past life, like a snake's skin. To be rid of the effort of having relationships, memories. To do nothing. Just sit. Empty.

At Christmas that year I tried again. We designed and printed our own Christmas cards that year for the first time and I sent him one. In the middle of January the card came back from the home with a note saying that the old man had been taken away from the home by his son. They had no forwarding address so they were returning the card to me.

I saw him once more after that, in March. Our son had been ill for several days and we were taking it in turns to stay at home and nurse him.

One morning I'd given him breakfast and settled him down on the sofa in the front room. There was a children's program on the television and he was watching it without much enthusiasm. I was standing at the window looking out into the street. A bus came past the window, a small van, one or two people on bicycles, cars, people walking into the town. Looking but not seeing I stared out of the window and then, on the opposite side of the road, I saw him. He was wearing a faded brown mackintosh and a brown trilby hat. He was standing perfectly still, looking straight in the window at me. We looked at each other and he smiled and raised his hand in the smallest wave. Just the slow spreading of his fingers.

Something disturbed the television and it suddenly burst into the kind of loud rasping that you get with the snowstorm when transmission breaks down. Involuntarily I started to the set to bang it with my hand and when I turned back to the window a moment later there was no sign of him, though I went out to the front gate to look up and down the street.

I never saw him again, and some time later, when I moved to another job in a different part of the country, I sold the press and printing equipment I had gathered. It wasn't that I'd lost interest in it. Rather that other interests took precedence. But I kept the old man's sample book. A press can look after itself. It's got substance. Iron. It survives. Something like the sample book though is ephemeral itself, like memory. Like a life.