

Private Press Books, 1959-1974

The Private Press, 1971

Typographia Naturalis, 1967

Watson's Preface to the History of Printing, 1963

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the
Doctor of Philosophy degree of the Loughborough University
of Technology.

November 1978

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The common theme which unites the published work here submitted is that of the history of the book as a physical object. Though by no means concerned with McLuhan's 'the medium is the message', the work deals with questions of the techniques and aesthetics of various aspects of printing and has little concern with the literary or informative textual content of the works printed.

1. The annual handlist Private Press Books, on which work started in 1959 and still continues (since 1975 by other hands) was developed from the realisation that:

- i) Much work was being produced by amateur printers and those known by the convenient but ill-defined name of 'private presses', which was often of typographic (and sometimes textual) merit, but on which information was difficult to obtain. Because of the circumstances of its production, much was never caught by legal deposit or handled through booktrade channels. Consequently a substantial proportion of such work was not listed in national or book-trade bibliographies.
- ii) Even for that proportion of private presswork which was recorded in these bibliographies, the form of entry did not include the sort of information required by those interested in the book as an art form, rather than a vehicle for the text.
- iii) There was no single convenient current bibliographical record of work about private presses.

Having persuaded Thomas Rae - whose Book of the Private Press (Greenock, Signet Press, 1958) provided the foundation

on which bibliographical work could be developed - to join me in editing such a work, and having persuaded the Private Libraries Association to undertake its publication, progress was possible. The work involved developing a style of entry which would contain the information required by those interested in private presses, identifying and persuading private printers to co-operate and supply copies or detail of their work for listing, and locating and recording the periodical articles and other publications about private presses. With my move to Jamaica in 1959 it was agreed that I would collect and prepare entries from new world presses, and prepare the section on private press literature; in addition I contributed the prefatory surveys of pressbook design which appeared in the volumes for 1959 and 1960. Subsequently when a move to Northern Nigeria in 1964 made it impracticable for me to continue surveying the literature, this part of the work was taken over by Peter Hoy (now of Merton College, Oxford). I remained responsible for collecting and preparing the entries for presses in the Americas until I retired from active participation after the 1974 volume.

Private Press Books has not achieved the ideal of complete coverage of the field, even for the English-speaking countries. It has nevertheless provided a usable guide to the work of amateur letterpress printers producing bookwork. Though a record of ephemera, amateur journalism and other non-book publications would have much use, editorial circumstances (i.e. unpaid voluntary labour) made it impracticable to attempt such coverage. The descriptive formula has been refined and elaborated considerably since publication started in 1959: although sometimes unsatisfactory (e.g. in providing

adequate descriptions of some of the remarkable publications of Walter Hamady's Perishable Press) it has provided a model for some other bibliographical work which has come with the renaissance of interest in the private press: the newsletter Fine Print is an instance.

2. The Private Press (London, Faber, 1971; New York, Watson-Guption 1972) was in part a natural growth from Private Press Books written in order to provide a record and survey of private press activity since Will Ransom's Private Press and their Books (New York, Bowker, 1927) and other works of that generation. The original work which it contains was based on first-hand contact with contemporary private printers in Britain and America (such as Morris Cox of the Gogmagog Press, Count Potocki of Montalk, New York Chappel Members, the Leicestershire group centred around Rigby Graham) and on discussions or correspondence with those of the previous generation: Sir Francis Meynell, Christopher Sandford, Laura Riding, Frank Altschul, Mrs. Dora Herbert-Jones and others.

The book was however also intended as a corrective to those texts, of which Norman E. Binns's Introduction to Historical Bibliography (2nd ed., London, Association of Assistant Librarians, 1962) was one example, which tended to limit the idea of the private press to those presses operated in the framework of the Arts and Crafts Movement. (Colin Franklin's excellent The Private Presses (London, Studio-Vista, 1969) which is also of this kind was not published until my text was almost completed). The thesis of The Private Press was that private printing has existed almost as long as printing from moveable types has been practised; and I attempted to illustrate this by discussion of

some of the different types of non-commercial activity such as the use of the press as an educational toy, the wealthy man's hobby, or the author as printer/publisher. It was not intended as a complete survey of all private printing; the book is a sampler. For the historical aspects of the work completely original research was limited in extent (though for some presses, such as the Bunmahon Press or the Duncairn Press the work was fresh) but much was developed from a variety of little-used secondary works such as Lackman's Annalium typographicorum (Hamburg, 1740) and it consequently dealt with matter seldom discussed in modern English writing.

3. Typographic naturalis (Brewhouse Press, 1967) was concerned with a special method of illustration: the use of natural objects to produce a printing surface without the interposition of an artist. Of particular interest for botanical illustration, it was also used from time to time for other purposes (banknote printing, specimens of lace) and has been used to a limited extent by private presses in developing illustration techniques. It was written in collaboration with Geoffrey Wakeman, whose special interest was in the refinement of nature printing as an intaglio process by Alois Auer, Henry Bradbury and others in the nineteenth century. I wrote the section on the early relief nature-printing methods used up to the nineteenth century by Kniphof and others; Wakeman dealt with the nineteenth century; and I wrote the section on nature printing today, drawing on my own practical experiments in the simple relief process, and on my observation of Morris Cox's offset methods in particular.

4. Watson's Preface to 'The History of Printing, 1713', (Signet Press, 1963), to which I contributed the introduction and notes. Watson is a work of some significance, less for its text which is translated from LaCaille (1689) than for the Preface in which the master printer attempted to persuade fellow Scottish printers to improve their typographic standards. His recommendations are frequently quoted by modern typographic historians (e.g. L. C. Wroth, The Colonial Printer). His account of Scottish printing, the first to be published, is of special interest in the history of Scottish typography.

A good critical edition of Watson's Preface was prepared by W. J. Couper in 1913. My own was not intended to replace it, but merely to make the text available once more in a suitable typographic dress to mark the 250th anniversary of the first publication in Edinburgh. Had it been intended as a scholarly text I would have avoided the conceit of disguising the editorship under my middle names James Munro, which seemed not inappropriate in a book on a Scottish subject from a Scottish private press.

These four works were aimed at a specialised readership and they were not therefore supported by a wealth of annotation and citation of authorities, which would have been appropriate to academic textbooks.

NOTE Since the works are now out of print and difficult to obtain on the antiquarian market, the copies submitted are electrostatic prints from the originals. Blank pages in the originals have not been copied, and the list of plates in Private Press Books has also been omitted.