


The printing craft has a grand history well worth exploring, and the three books reviewed here share a sense of that tradition.

Ruari McLean's autobiography, *True to Type*, reflects his skills as designer, author, and typographer, and concentrates on his lifelong interest in typography and the printed word. In his earlier book, *The Thames and Hudson Manual of Typography*, McLean states that “‘Typography’ is the art, or skill of designing communication by means of the printed word.” McLean has spent many decades in this demanding but rewarding profession.

Born in Scotland in 1917, young McLean read children's magazines voraciously and discovered poetry at the age of ten. His family life was uneventful and, having failed to get a scholarship to Oxford, he fell into the printing profession. McLean paints a loving portrait of his first employer, Bernard Newdigate of The Shakespeare Head Press, and he shares his discovery of Stanley Morison and *The Monotype Recorder*. His prewar experiences must have been remarkable: living in the same house as the brilliant wood engraver Gertrude Hermes (given barely passing mention), encountering Penguin Books, and beginning to write about printing. His activities during the Second World War included acting as a liaison officer on a French submarine and surveying beaches in India. At the end of the war he married and began his typographic career in earnest.

Having had only a year of formal training at the Edinburgh School of Printing, McLean was clearly a 'quick study.' He made friends with Robert Harling, a fine designer and Victorian type aficionado. In 1946 he was working at Penguin Books with the legendary Jan Tschichold, and learning on the job. Soon he was a tutor in typography at the Royal College of Art, worked on a children's magazine, and eventually became a partner with George
Rainbird in creating lavish book packages to be sold to publishers. McLean has some interesting anecdotes about the gentlemen publishers of the period and his encounters with artists such as Augustus John.

McLean doesn’t reveal when his fascination with Victorian book design and printing began, but he tells amusing stories of his searches among booksellers. His collection became the inspiration for his fine study of Victorian book design and production. (There is a Canadian connection, of course, since his collection is now at Massey College Library, University of Toronto.) In the course of designing magazines he wrote about magazine design, and his basic text on typography for Thames and Hudson holds up very well, despite the change in production methods over the years. He has also translated Jan Tschichold’s 1935 classic, *Typographische Gestaltung* (the publication of which was financed by the Toronto typesetting firm of Cooper & Beatty), and has compiled a book on Tschichold.

McLean worked as a freelance designer for many years, and talks of the vagaries of the profession. But I don’t have a sense of any sacrifice to the craft of design. McLean’s offices seemed to be conveniently located near fashionable Soho restaurants, and many of his clients seemed to be of “the old school, to whom publishing and the wine trade were the only businesses suitable for a gentleman.” Don’t these people work?

McLean was Typographic Advisor to Her Majesty’s Stationery Office for 14 years and became involved in art education as an external assessor. He makes interesting observations on the development (or decline?) when typography became ‘graphic design’ and graphic design merged with other art disciplines, and on the sorry state in schools when administration took precedence over teaching.

McLean’s book remains an enigma to me. All of our lives are personal and precious, and inevitably we edit our personalities to suit the needs and responses of our family or friends. But by concentrating exclusively on the professional aspect of what I assume has been a rich and satisfying life, McLean has denied his readers a complete view of himself. It is more than a question of British reticence or of McLean’s reluctance to infuse his autobiography with more details of his family and friends. What really touches and affects him beyond his profession? Perhaps I’ve been spoiled by other British printing-related memoirs like Andrew J. Corrigan’s *A Printer and His World*, Charles Manley Smith’s *The Working Man’s*
Way in the World, the painful but passionate journals of Cobden-Sanderson, and the deeply affecting Graven Image of John Farleigh. McLean reveals more emotion in his affectionate memoir of his friend Reynolds Stone than he does in most of this book. Sadly, the details of the profession McLean seems to admire so much have changed, and much of his own graphic work now seems as unimaginative as its reproduction throughout the book. Regrettably, this is neither a particularly bad nor a particularly good volume, but a memoir of a professional life for family and friends, leaving the general reader deserving a better book.

The Kynoch Press of Birmingham has an unusual history. It was begun in 1876 as an adjunct to Kynoch & Co., a munitions factory that required printing services for producing wrappers and labels for sporting and military cartridges, boxes for ammunition, and advertising material. George Kynoch, the flamboyant proprietor, created the press to keep printing economically viable within the firm and maintain control over all printed items. Since there was no need for the in-house printing office to make a profit, it was soon involved in creating company stationery, in-house journals, elaborate commemorative menus, and other high-quality printing. The company’s existence reflected what Carlyle called two of “the three elements of modern civilization: gunpowder, printing, and the Protestant religion.”

Archer describes the gradual evolution of the Kynoch Press into a quality publishing office that took on a variety of outside jobs while producing excellent work for its parent company. She explores the qualifications, contributions, and achievements of each successive printing manager. She interviewed a number of employees and has thus humanized to some degree what at times is a dry corporate history.

From 1900 to 1921, under the guidance of Donald Hope, who had a strong interest in art and design, the Press re-introduced legible typefaces like Caslon in its composing room and developed its typecasting capabilities by buying Monotype equipment and modernizing its plant. The Press achieved a solid reputation for quality design and production. Gradually Kynoch & Co. was merged with similar munitions companies, and in 1926 it became part of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), a worldwide organization and the largest company in the British Empire. Linked to a vast manufacturer, the Kynoch Press had to provide quality goods and services for both the parent company and its outside clients.
By 1922 the Press was being guided by Herbert Simon, who began as a compositor, worked with William Rudge and Bruce Rogers, and brought solid printing experience and common sense to the firm. Under Simon's direction the Press modernized its equipment, emphasized excellent craftsmanship to its expanding clientele, and equipped its composing room with revivals of nineteenth-century founts and unusual continental display faces. Typographic design under Herbert Simon became a very professional skill that attracted clients like Francis Meynell's Nonesuch Press, for which the Press printed thirteen titles. With people like Harry Carter heading its sales office, the Kynoch Press reached its peak, attracting clients like the Design Industries Association, the BBC, and luxury food stores. By 1926 ICI set up a publicity department, expanded the printing department, and the Kynoch Press was producing internal and technical printing.

In 1933 Herbert Simon resigned after trying to decrease the Press's dependence on ICI. His successor, H.V. Davis, was ignorant of typography, design, and the subtle skills needed in managing staff. There was no expansion of equipment, and a subsequent decline in the quality of work produced and loss of major clients. By 1938 Michael Clapham took over. Having worked with the designer Jan Tschichold, as an amateur printer, Clapham had a feel for printing and was able to restore the confidence of employees and improve standards. Offset lithography was introduced in the Press, and the composing room acquired new Monotype faces such as Times Roman, but the Second World War created a virtual standstill, and paper shortages restricted the Press to the most utilitarian printing.

New personnel with practical printing experience to bring to print management helped the Kynoch Press adapt to postwar conditions and produce fine work for clients such as the newly rebuilt Coventry Cathedral. As colour offset printing improved in Britain, the Press was able to offer high-quality colour printing. By the 1960s the Press was employing well-trained professional designers and using design as a selling point. Bob Gill of Fletcher/Forbes/Gill briefly headed the Press's design studio. The Press also faced the challenges of printing on untraditional materials like plastics, fabric, and metals.

The isolation of the Kynoch Press within ICI was a serious drawback to its expansion. It tried to seek more of the industrial publishing market and increase its external clients by offering a complete printing service for exporters, including foreign-language
composition using its many non-Latin type founts, translation, and documentation. However, this service to the international trade had limited success.

By the 1970s the Press was using computer typesetting and producing new work: directories, mailing lists, commemorative literature, and gazetteers. It attracted some American publishing clients who took advantage of its excellent composing room. But its parent company no longer understood the relevance of its printing office and was unwilling to invest further in the Press. In 1979 the Press was sold to the Scottish-based Gilmour and Dean Group. But with a major recession in Britain and insufficient work to occupy the presses, the Kynoch Press was closed in 1981.

Fully one-third of the book is devoted to tables of the Press’s holdings of typefaces and a highly detailed descriptive catalogue of works printed. The composing room must have been remarkable by any standard, and Armstrong emphasizes that the Kynoch Press was a printer for the connoisseur. She shows the evolution of the Kynoch Press’s typefaces, decade by decade, and compares the Press’s holdings across six decades with those of their major competitors. Armstrong’s research is nothing less than astonishing; her highly specialized investigation of her subject is a model of care and thoughtful involvement.

Although it can be annoyingly repetitive at times and shows its source as a thesis rather than a freshly inspired trade book, Armstrong’s study will be of interest to those involved in printing and print management. Despite its specifically British slant, the book’s moral is universal in this age of global mergers: where there is no vision by corporations, quality perishes.

In Alphabets to Order, Alastair Johnston’s love affair with letterforms takes on new meaning as he investigates texts set by nineteenth-century compositors. By examining the literary content of the fragmentary and spontaneous texts used to display words or paragraphs in typefounders’ specimen books, Johnston discovers a serious sub-text to these seemingly random words. He feels that the texts were written in the composing stick by compositors “who, like graffiti artists, had nothing in particular to say but an overwhelming need to say it.”

The Industrial Revolution created a need for advertising many newly manufactured goods, and Johnston sees the resulting acceleration in the variety of typefaces as a response to this need.
The Great Exhibition of 1851 focussed on both printing and manufacturing, resulting in an explosion of handbills and placards. Types spoke to less sophisticated readers through their shape and size, and new non-book reading patterns were created with the advent of posters and broadsides emphasizing a single word or two in their texts.

The classic book-oriented type specimen had been exemplified by Caslon’s quotation from Cicero: “Quousque tandem abutere Catilena, patientia nostra?” with its even line colour but poor selection of type characters (Latin has many vowels). By 1799 the famous Fry typefoundry in London produced *Pantographia*, an attempt to show all known world languages set in many exotic types (with transliterations set in roman typefaces), and samples were set in the Lord’s Prayer, allowing for a means of comparison – an approach that many type specimen books followed.

Johnston shows the typefounders’ interest in the origins of printing: arguments (often pastiches of current knowledge) in favour of or against its invention by Gutenberg would creep into sample paragraphs, set in slab serif or script types. Doggerel verse in praise of printing would also appear:

> Behold the Press! From which pure fountain springs  
> The talent that upholds the Throne of Kings!

The inundation of posters resulted in mechanically constructed letterforms and fat faces (“lowercase with elephantiasis”), and some illegible atrocities were created. (One compositor described condensed typefaces as SPLENDID TYPES FOR SQUEEZING.) There was a new interaction between letterform and reader. With very large type sizes and remarkably ugly forms, the compositor could set only a word or two per page in specimen books, creating non-sequiturs, nonsense headlines, or fantasy homages:

> ANGELIC.
> Quousque de
> Manchester

With the introduction of wood type in the late 1820s, a compositor might create bold settings of NODE and ITCH, or:

> LIFE
> Trifle

Johnston discusses the use of script and black-letter typefaces, the lack of hyphenation at line endings, and the physical size of type to
create “loud” and “soft” typography. Humour seems established in Thorowgood’s specimen book of 1843:

MANCHESTER FANCY DRESS ASSEMBLY
GROTESQUE EXHIBITIONS

and

ATMOSPHERIC RAILWAY DIRECT FROM LONDON TO EDINBURGH.
CONCERT EXTRAORDINAIRE, 1,234,567,890 PERFORMERS!

These specimen books would have been produced during slow moments, and were intended to last for many years, hence Thomas MacKellar’s injunction:

Printer spare that book!
Cut not a single leaf!
You know not half the pains we took,
Or you’d regard our grief.

Texts mirrored their times. Book printers may have offered straightforward setting or extracts from such choice samples as “The Social State of the Arabs,” “Six Hours in Iceland,” or “The Personal Appearance of Aristotle” which reflected the reading of their clients. Some texts were repeated throughout a book, but gradually the texts were left to the imagination and skill of the compositor. Lottery notices and handbills were an inspiration, as was the gold fever that gripped America:

DEEP MINES
Treasures Concealed

By mid-century, the compositors were in their element, inventing nonsense words to fill their lines:

HUNEM tompier
MONCRISE hemichud
TRENTURED dermonstrate
REAN BIRMENEH unsdem emodan
PORTANTEM SEREALOS

Hunter S. Thompson met his match with headlines such as:

RUMINANTIA'S REFLECTIONS ON CUD-CHEWING
MULTITUDINOUS MONOSYLABES
INCOMPREHENSIBLE MEGALOSAURIANS
UNBEDIZENED FEMININITIES
or this joyful take on Ben Jonson:

_Squintie, Glintie, Petit Maitre_
Professor of Lady Ogling and Agreeable Nothings in Elite Circles
Antics Performed equaling Improved Puppets
Good Looks Essential, Commonsense a Hindrance

The book reveals American racism of the time as reflected in Pidgin English quotations on candy stamps and some highly offensive anti-black lines in some specimen books. But with the advent of Japonisme and ‘artistic’ printing, some specimen books produced semi-parodies of Japanese haikai:

_CRICKET & SPECKLED SPIDER_
What’s this bug traveling up my coat sleeve?

Johnston investigates the phenomenon of the itinerant or tramp printer, often a well-educated compositor with wanderlust, an interest in booze and the ladies, and no desire to reform himself:

_AH! HOW GOES THE BOTTLE?_
A Swallow Doesn’t Make A Summer.

These were the masters of “the art preservative,” with remarkable digital skills and independence, who, with a union card, could pick up work almost anywhere. Their ranks, for a time, included Mark Twain and Walt Whitman. Johnston delights in their responses to current events:

_MONUMENTS OF NINEVEH_
Noontide Rambles and Crumbling Buildings

their parodies of contemporary newspaper headlines:

_BARBECUES AT THE SOUTH SEAS_
Roast Missionaries on Toast

and their response to political corruption:

_Boodletumville Whitewashing Association_
Bribed Politicians Vindicated Assisted Canadian Tourists
Tarnished Reputations Polished Successfully

Typesetters were often more interested in a word’s appearance than its meaning. “Academy of Tyqograhic Art” suggests that the ‘p’ box ran dry and the compositor refused to give up. But these unsung heroes of the composing stick had their own comments on literature:
BREATHES THERE A MAN WITH SOUL SO DEAD
Who to His Friend Has Never Said
I Would Like To Borrow Five Dollars
CURRENT FUNDS OR LEGAL TENDER ACCEPTED

and found their own voices, albeit anonymously, in the practice of their craft:

THE POET OF THE FUTURE
Hiding His Light Under the Bushel of the Specimen-Book.

Alastair Johnston’s extraordinary book is by turns witty, informed, challenging, joyful, and provocative. He has profound sympathy for his self-created subject, and has the commitment and knowledge to convince us of its importance. This delightful study should appeal to anyone interested in language, sociology, printing history, and humanity.

Readers interested in seeing further examples of the textual and graphic wit of nineteenth-century job compositors might like to consult one of the editions of the typographic volume of Clarence P. Hornung’s Handbook of Early Advertising Art, published by Dover Publications.

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The new Cambridge History of the Book in Britain begins in medias res with the third of seven projected volumes, covering the period from 1400 to 1557. On the basis of this volume we can look forward to a national history which will fulfill its mandate well and complement both the existing and forthcoming accounts of the book elsewhere in Europe and in the English-speaking world.

The period the volume covers is demarcated by shifts in technology, most notably the arrival of print in 1476, in the organization of the book trade, and to a considerable extent in the nature of the contents of books, particularly in the wake of the