
"I was not taught book design," Derek Birdsall states in the preface to his entertaining and idiosyncratic *Notes on Book Design*; "this book plots a learning curve of my experience and purpose – which is quite simply the decent setting of type and the intelligent layout of text and pictures based on a rigorous study of content."

Birdsall’s remark should not surprise anyone. British book design was in its infancy in the early 1950s, even with that nation’s long history of fine book publishing. There were no recognized qualifications to become a typographer, no place where one could study design, its history, or its practice. Nonetheless, times were changing and by the late 1930s, with the influence of such European-trained designers as Jan Tschichold, the first British designers – Stanley Morison, Francis Meynell, Oliver Simon, and Ruari McLean – began to influence the British book trade.

Birdsall was part of the post-war generation and his experience was typical. Interested in typography and printing, he took a general arts course at Wakefield College of Art, where he was eventually encouraged to apply for a typography course at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. There, in 1952, he studied “for only a few months” under Anthony Froshaug, but Froshaug’s “love of clarity” was a revelation and a lifelong example. Froshaug taught only two years at Central, but his teaching was to influence a generation of designers on two continents. A young Frank Newfeld was also in Froshaug’s class at Central, and Newfeld, too, sensed the growing excitement of the possibilities of type. Newfeld’s arrival in Canada just two years later in 1954 was of profound influence to the Canadian book trade.

*Notes on Book Design* documents a similar experience and, as a guidebook to Birdsall’s 50 years in design, is a survey of 40 years of work. Birdsall has selected nearly 50 of his favourite designs – projects that were of significance to his development as a designer, and ones that presented a number of design problems that were solved successfully. The book is a selection of career highlights, and Birdsall makes us aware how each of these books was important. We are witness to much of his learning curve, from his early work with Penguin paperback covers in the 1960s and early 1970s through his remarkable work with American museum exhibition catalogues and other illustrated non-fiction books.
The title is appropriate, for *Notes* is a compilation of fragments and sketches. The book has been organized in an orderly and logical fashion, yet no one part is comprehensive or exhaustive. Many books have been left out, many ideas passed over, and a great deal of technical detail is summarized in passing. While *Notes* is part reminiscence, it is not a memoir; it contains career highlights but is in no way a catalogue raisonné. This is a composite of observations, biographical details, technical and layout instructions, and reminiscences, all framing a selection of important books designed by Birdsall. The book it most closely resembles is Alan Bartram’s *Making Books: Design in British Publishing Since 1945* (1999), or perhaps more tellingly, one of the museum exhibition catalogues that are so beautifully documented within its pages. The book projects are presented as beautiful images in an exhibition, held up for our enjoyment and for what they can teach us.

Birdsall is a master of illustrated non-fiction in all its contemporary manifestations: the encyclopaedia, the exhibition catalogue, the science textbook, the photo documentary, the photo essay. Only one of his selected books “worth noting” lacks illustrations, and only one other project (his covers for Penguin fiction paperbacks from the 1960s and 1970s) lacks interior illustrations. Nonetheless, Birdsall is a skilled craftsman of the printed text block, as is evident by his masterful handling of the Church of England’s *Common Worship* (2000). It is a triumph of clarity, logic, functionality, and spacing. More than any other book, it proves his claim that “I have tried to show that the book designs that I have produced are based on simple discoverable facts about the books themselves.”

Of course, colourful illustrated trade publications are the most visually interesting for the reader, and Birdsall exploits the lively visual presentation of his 50 projects. Project covers and double-page spreads are well reproduced throughout the book (often so well that the text itself can be read clearly), and the pacing is excellent. If these designs were not convincing enough, Birdsall’s handling of *Notes* confirms his dexterity; for *Notes* is a book with its own structural problems. Birdsall has chosen the typeface “Schreibmaschinen-Schriften” [typewriter type] for his running commentary on each project. In fact the front endpapers show a photocopy of his Olivetti Lettera 35 and his own typed notes. The results are jarring. The Contents page, all bibliographic information, all quotations on book design (in red), and Birdsall’s own words (anything not connected to the reproductions of the 50 books) appear to have been typed onto the
page. Imagine the contrast of these beautifully designed texts with Birdsall’s rough typewritten “notes” superimposed on the pages. Birdsall explains that his editors “both expressed their dislike” of this “mannered” presentation, but that he had “rarely been more sure of my choice of typeface.” The typeface certainly preserves the illusion of the notebook; it also works. When contending with full-colour images of often astonishingly rich multiple double-page spreads, the eye easily finds Birdsall’s comments and bibliographic information. Its harshness and contrast save it from being lost on the page, and at the same time save it from competing with the images illustrated below. The central design problem of this book has been solved, and solved successfully.

If any doubt remains about Birdsall’s ability to handle type, there is a lengthy appendix on “examples of typefaces and grids which might be useful when starting the design of a book.” The section, “On choosing a typeface,” shows the same text reproduced 27 times in different specimens of type, providing a “swift guide to the appearance of types I have often used for various books.” There is also a section on “Different leading & effect on ‘colour.’” Birdsall’s point is made. For the typographic keeners these sections are essential; there is a valiant effort to make “Monotype Poliphilus” interesting. For those who find pure typographic projects less compelling, this is a notebook and the pages may be turned quickly.

While such technical advice is available, there is more than enough visual material to enchant the rank amateur concerned only with the delights of the printed page. For anyone interested in how books are imagined and put together, Birdsall’s book will be a pleasure. Unlike many book design texts, this is an easy one to read and enjoy. I read most of it in one evening. Notes joins a small but growing number of personal memoirs by book designers attempting to document their work, their achievements, and their contribution to book history. These narratives will soon prove to be essential tools for historians of twentieth-century design and book history. Very little information on Birdsall has been written to date and Notes on Book Design is an excellent introduction to his work. Let’s hope that Birdsall will write more about his years in the trade, for what this book makes clear is that we need to hear more from this most logical and visually compelling of designers.

RANDALL SPELLER

Art Gallery of Ontario