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THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS PRESS

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FEW institutions can, without challenge, be called the most famous of their kind. But no one, I believe, would dispute the claim of the Oxford University Press to be the most famous, the oldest and the best of all the presses the world has ever known. Other presses were more famous and influential in their day—Plantin, Elzevir, Froben, Aldus, Estienne are great names but none of them lasted so long.

The Oxford University Press may be said to have begun in 1478 when Theodoric the Red came to Oxford from Cologne and printed a fourth-century Latin theological treatise by Rufinus, Bishop of Aquileia. 1978 is thus the five-hundredth birthday of the OUP and that anniversary has been celebrated by an exhibition and by the publication of two Oxford books. The exhibition opened at the Morgan Library in New York last spring and is now travelling to other parts of the world. It presented some 332 artifacts—books (including the 1478 Rufinus), cases of type, paintings, documents and photographs. *The Oxford University Press and the Spread of Learning: An Illustrated History* by Nicholas Barker is a sumptuous catalogue in folio of that exhibition with some 200 plates and an introduction by Barker. It is not a history nor does it tell us much about the spread of learning but it does give us some idea of why the OUP has been and is so important. It is a pleasant book to lay on the coffee table for the browser. The second volume to commemorate the Quincentennial of the OUP is Peter Sutcliffe's *The Oxford University Press: An Informal History*. The "formal" history is presumably Harry Carter's three-volume *History of the Oxford University Press* of which only the first volume (1975) has appeared so far.

It is a measure of the importance of the OUP that so many scholarly books have been written about it. Falconer Madan's three volumes of *Oxford Books* (1895-1931) list everything, Bibles and Prayer Books excepted, printed in Oxford before 1680 and the list will be completed in Carter's *History*; Stanley Morison, *John Fell, the University Press and the "Fell" Types* (1967) is a splendid folio by one of the most distinguished of modern book designers; I. G. Philip, *Blackstone and the Reform of the Oxford University Press in the Eighteenth Century* (1957) and John Johnson and Strickland Gibson's *Print and Privilege at Oxford to the Year 1700* (1946) are handsome and scholarly works, and there are others, all of them, of course, printed at Oxford.

The beginnings of the Press were slow. Seventeen books were published between 1478-1486; eight in 1517-1518 and then none until 1585. These first twenty-five books were either classical texts or theological treatises and all but one were in Latin. With the appointment of the Earl of Leicester, Queen Elizabeth's favorite, as Chancellor of the University the Press was revived and from 1585 to the end of the Queen's reign books were published each year for a total of 46; and the OUP has published books each year since then. 2589 works were printed in the seventeenth century; the number dropped to 2473 in the eighteenth century when the University slumbered but rose to nearly 10,000 in the nineteenth century. In 1970 the OUP was printing 850 new titles each year, carrying 17,000 items in its catalogue and distributing 17,000,000 books annually.

From the many books about the Press, the curious reader can construct a fascinating chronicle of important events interspersed with anecdotes and odd facts. Many of these latter are good antiquarian fun since Oxford has always been peopled with eccentric geniuses and witty cranks. In the 1860's the Press refused to invite the Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge to edit an edition of Milton's poems because "he was unsound on eternal damnation" and a socialist (albeit a Christian one). A nineteenth-century Delegate of the Press refused to attend an emergency meeting of great importance because "unfortunately Saturday is my day for shooting." In 1716 the Press published 500 copies of the New Testament in Coptic, the last copy of which was sold in 1907, marked down from twenty-one shillings to twelve shillings and sixpence. Then there was the translation from the German of Müller's treatise on birds: *Certain Variations in the Vocal Organs of Passeres (that have hitherto escaped notice)* which was published in the 1870's and sold

21 copies in 25 years. (But Charles Darwin had recommended it to the Press!)

If the great institution which we know was slow in developing we should remember, Sutcliffe writes, "the society from which it sprang: its parochialism, its isolation, its fears of the world beyond its gates. It was a society of shy hypochondriacs." Was there, perhaps, a connection between the revival of the University and the Press after 1870, the year when dons were permitted to marry?

These anecdotes and antiquarian curiosities amount to little more than the trivial chitchat of any Oxford High Table. The important thing in the chronicle is the list of glorious books published in ever increasing numbers. Until the end of the eighteenth century most of the books were in Latin and were either classical or theological texts. The remarkable expansion both in numbers and range of titles came only at the end of the nineteenth century. Even a list, not of important titles but of the important series of books published by the OUP would be too long to print here. But everyone knows about some of them: the Oxford Classical Texts, the standard editions of the classics of English prose and poetry, the grammars, the Companions, the Oxford histories, the atlases, the World's Classics, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the Oxford Book of Verse and especially the dictionaries culminating in the Oxford English Dictionary which is the greatest dictionary of any language in the world. Begun in 1879 and completed in 1928, the OED was published at a deficit of nearly \$2,000,000 (no one knows exactly how much since the OUP was, until recently, very informal in keeping accounts) and remains the most remarkable publishing effort since the invention of printing.

And then there are the Bibles in so many editions that no one has ever bothered to count them. One million copies of the Revised New Testament were sold on publication day, May 17, 1881; Appleton and Company had the whole text set up on board the boat bringing the first copies to America and was selling thousands of copies two days after the ship landed, while the "Chicago Tribune" had the text cabled to Chicago and printed it in their edition of May 22. More than one and one-half million copies of the India Paper Bible measuring $3\frac{3}{4}$ by $2\frac{1}{8}$ by $\frac{3}{4}$ inches were sold 1874-1907. In 1907 the skins of 100,000 goats were used each year for the bindings of Oxford Bibles and the lettering on the bindings required 400,000 sheets of gold leaf annually. In 1907, 98 editions of the Bible were listed in the catalogue.

This great publishing effort was not accomplished without struggles, lapses, bitter disputes about who controlled the Press and all the petty intrigues for which Oxford Common Rooms are famous. But in the end the OUP emerged as a great national and international institution responsible for making available to the widest possible audience the best and most important books of the world. Today when one thinks of the Cavendish (at Cambridge) and the Bodleian and OUP (at Oxford) one might well conclude that a great university consists entirely of a laboratory, a library and a press: and like charity, perhaps, the greatest of these is the press.

This is the kind of factual information we can get from the histories of the OUP which we now have: the real history of that Press remains to be written. The history of printing, like the history of universities, seems to attract the antiquarian, the chronicler, the retailer of anecdotes and curiosities who do not ask the important questions. A student of the history of universities is inevitably appalled by the thousands of pages of pious and dreary recording of events great and small without any attempt to penetrate below the surface. We at Rutgers are most fortunate to have Richard McCormick's *Rutgers: A Bicentennial History* which stands with Morison's volumes on Harvard College—the only first-rate histories of any American university. Unhappily, none of the historians of the OUP asks the big questions.

The OUP is one of the great cultural institutions of the modern world and it is connected at every point with the social, political and intellectual history of our world in the last 500 years. Some speculation on these connections is surely in order. For example: the most important patrons of the modern Press in the seventeenth century were Archbishop Laud, executed by the radical Puritans, and Bishop John Fell, installed by the triumphant restorers of the monarchy after 1660. Both men were learned, lovers of scholarship, admirers of the classics and devout Christians. They were also strong supporters of hierarchy, royal power, and the established order. Under their guidance the Press published learned books in Latin and Greek for an elite class which they hoped would govern the nation. Fell did publish one bestseller in English, his friend Richard Allestree's *The Whole Duty of Man* which taught inferiors to obey their betters. (The second bestseller published by the Press in English was Clarendon's splendid *History of the Great Rebellion* [1702] which demonstrated with great style and learning the folly of rebelling against the established order of things.) Both Laud and Fell

were great benefactors of the Press and of scholarship but they continued that Renaissance tradition which tied together learning and love of the classics with a reactionary love of the *status quo* or even the *status quo ante* and with an elite class of educated rulers which has bedevilled the study of the humanities ever since. Only gradually and with great misgivings did the Delegates of the OUP learn to think of a wider audience.

The publication of Benjamin Jowett's famous translation of the dialogues of Plato in 1871 was a problem—the OUP did not publish translations since gentlemen and scholars would have no difficulty reading the originals. Jowett was finally accepted as a commentary which happened to have a translation appended. Jowett himself, the Master of Balliol and a Delegate of the Press, also wanted the University and the Press to serve an elite; but it was an elite recruited from the middle class on the basis of talent which would be sent out from Oxford to administer and govern the world. For these people translations of the classics and editions of English books might serve better than Greek and Latin to “liberalize their minds and prevent that narrowness which is too often the consequence of a life attached to the pursuits of lucre.” The OUP had finally discovered that middle class created by the industrial revolution. In time it went further and discovered a lower class for which it could furnish redeeming texts (in addition to the Bible)—the lower middle classes apparently read Longfellow when in love and his poems in the World's Classics edition became a bestseller. Finally, there were all the strange people of the Empire. At the height of imperial power in 1900 “it became an affront to conscience to think that any part of the Empire should be deprived of the benefits of British civilization” and “it was one of the burdens of Empire that the spiritual as well as the material needs of Her Majesty's subjects should be served.” Hence, all the Oxford Bibles, grammars, dictionaries and cheap editions of the classics. As a result the English language became and remains the world language, perhaps the most important legacy of an Empire which has disappeared.

But if the Queen's English was to be, with the help of the OUP, *the* world language there should, obviously, be an authoritative standard for that language. Hence the great OED and Fowler's enormously popular *Modern English Usage*. But alas, both the OED and Fowler are already obsolete. The Press issues Supplements to the OED and new editions of Fowler but standard English is a lost cause like so many other Oxford

causes and nowadays everyone “does his own thing, like.” “Speech” has become “communication,” “flammable” is the same as “inflammable,” “different than” is preferred to “different from” and, well, ya’ know. All this raises basic questions about the nature of language and it is a part of the history of the OUP.

Or again, the OUP put the Bible into the hands of millions of people all over the world and helped to make the parochial Protestantism of northern Europe a world religion. English-speaking people everywhere, brought up reading the Bible, had not only a common language but a common store of legends, histories, poetry, drama, figures of speech—the whole rich literature of the Old and New Testaments. The OUP still sells lots of Bibles but that book has now become a magic talisman which can be found in every hotel bedroom but which our students—even the Jesus freaks—no longer read.

The Bible publishing of the Press was important for another reason: the OUP is the model of the university press in that it publishes good books which lose money and pays for them from the profits of books which make money—and the most important of these latter was the Bible. But the profits from the Bible were in fact a form of public subsidy since the OUP had, together with the Cambridge University Press and the King’s Printer in London, the exclusive privilege of printing Bibles (and Prayer Books). Scholarly publishing as well as the arts and whole enterprise of education do not pay for themselves even in the most affluent of capitalist societies. They depend upon public subsidies.

A satisfactory history of the OUP would explore these and other similar questions. That history remains to be written. But what we do have in the various chronicles now available is a fascinating record of one of the most glorious institutions of the world culture.