Private Presses and Collector’s Editions

H. RICHARD ARCHER

The lack of adequate information relating to the subject of private presses and collector’s editions is partly due to the prevalent assumption that such books have only a limited appeal, and that a relatively small number of these publications are made available to buyers who frequently have tastes and interests that are more esoteric than those of the majority of American readers.

No one has successfully defined a “private press” to the satisfaction of those interested in the publications produced by these irregular and oftentimes interesting ventures. For the purpose of this article, a private press item is considered to be any book or pamphlet printed in an edition limited to fewer than 500 copies, and sold at a stated price to the collector or librarian, usually for less than the cost of materials and labor, or given free of charge. It is hardly necessary to stress the fact that these books are rarely money makers from the regular trade publisher’s point of view.

Generally, a private press operates differently from the general trade publisher. It may be organized to satisfy some inner urge of the proprietor-craftsman who has the desire to print and distribute books which are usually not accepted by a trade publisher, although there have been cases where books reissued by commercial firms have achieved a measure of success.

In the United States, Great Britain, and on the Continent private presses are sometimes operated as one man shops, and many of their printers gain personal satisfaction by earning a reputation for high quality work. From the times of Baskerville and Morris to the present, the outstanding contribution of the private press printer has been his ability to demonstrate “that printing can be thought of as an enjoyable and adventurous occupation.”

The term “collector’s editions” as used here, applies to publications which are produced by printers or publishers for a market which they

The author is Custodian, The Chapin Library, Williams College.
feel is waiting for the books on which they have risked their labor and capital. The contents of these books are of more than temporary interest; usually they are not topical or sensational writings and are produced according to well conceived formats appropriate to the text.

Many collectors think of themselves as connoisseurs of books, whether they read them or not, and frequently acquire them to satisfy their taste for desirable artifacts, or the decoration of their bookshelves. There is a demand for books representing this aspect of publishing, since they have flourished, in a small way, for over fifty years. Some of these items emphasize the gaudy, the “de luxe” and the unusual, no matter how bizarre it may be.

These books appeal to certain collectors and cannot be overlooked. There are presses that make it their chief aim to print and distribute collector’s editions, and there are books which become collector’s items but are not issued by private presses. Consequently there is no hard and fast rule whereby librarians and dealers can determine which books are likely to become collector’s items. Private presses are usually owned and operated by the printer, who is identical with the publisher, and he attempts to promote and sell his own books.

The private press movement, as we know it today in the United States, originated in England in the 1890’s, although the roots may be seen as early as the mid-eighteenth century. The cradle days of private presses in the United States date from the late nineteenth century, although there were certain minor examples as early as 1867 (Fair Hill Press), 1877 (Palmetto Press), and about 1879 (Appledore Press). However, until F. W. Goudy founded The Village Press at Park Ridge, Illinois, in 1903, there were no American presses which could compare favorably with their English counterparts. As early as 1900, Clarke Conwell established the Elston Press at New Rochelle, New York, which existed for four years and was strongly influenced by William Morris and his followers in England.

From the Alderbrink, Blue Sky, Kirgate, Bandar-Log and their kin, after 1920, a new generation of private presses came into being through famous typographers like C. P. Rollins, Will Bradley, T. M. Cleland, D. B. Updike, Bruce Rogers, Will Ransom, and W. A. Dwiggins. Many of these operated with their own hand-presses and equipment. From them the movement spread and can be traced through the work of Dard Hunter (Chillicothe, Ohio), Henry W. Kent (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), Porter Garnett (The Laboratory Press at Pittsburgh), and others who played important roles in combating
Private Presses and Collector’s Editions

the influence of Elbert Hubbard, who was primarily responsible for inspiring devotees to the cult of private presses.

Thomas Bird Mosher (Portland, Maine), published many editions for collectors and was able to carry on a thriving business from 1891 to 1925. The Riverside Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts) with Bruce Rogers as typographer for over a decade (1896–1914), John Henry Nash of San Francisco (active from 1906 to 1936), and various others were responsible for a large number of collector’s editions before the depression was felt in the United States.

Three typographers from abroad were dominating forces in the 1920’s and 1930’s, Rudolf Koch in Germany, and Eric Gill and Francis Meynell of England, as they helped to encourage many private presses in the United States. Much of the best commercial printing done after 1920, owes something to these experimental craftsmen, amateurs and professionals alike, who formed a connecting link to the great printers of the past and pointed the way for the younger members to follow.

Various organizations have been active in sponsoring and promoting the activities of private presses. Among the groups which helped to publicize printers and their books are: The Typophiles (New York), The Society of Typographic Arts (Chicago), The Society of Printers (Boston), The Rounce & Coffin Club (Los Angeles), and The American Institute of Graphic Arts.

The firms which have been active in maintaining the high standards include a number of the important university presses, among them, Princeton, Chicago, California, Oklahoma, Harvard, Columbia, and North Carolina. Representative of other establishments which have printed and distributed books of high quality are: The Lakeside Press which is owned by R. R. Donnelley & Sons in Chicago, The Meriden Gravure Company in Connecticut, The Marchbanks Press in New York City, and The Anthoensen Press in Portland, Maine. Although other distinguished firms were operating during the first half of the century, few survived to match the reputations of The Merrymount Press of D. B. Updike, Elmer Adler’s Pynson Printers, the DeVinne Press, and William E. Rudge which are no longer active.

A commercial firm which enjoyed great success as a publisher of collector’s editions, is the Peter Pauper Press, a division of the Walpole Printing Office, owned and operated by Peter and Edna Beilenson in Mount Vernon, New York. Of the eleven private presses which contributed to The Annual of Bookmaking, 1927–1937, seven are no longer actively engaged in book production, and five of these are no
longer in business. The other two issue infrequently collectors editions. The four presses which continued operations are George Grady, Overbrook Press, Walpole Printing Office, and Ward Ritchie (now Anderson, Ritchie & Simon).


The most active private presses of the recent decade are owned and operated by amateur printers whose number seems to be increasing steadily. The size of this group indicates that there are now more adherents to the ideas of William Morris and his followers than at any time since the prosperous 1920's.

Anyone examining collector's editions issued by private presses between 1946 and 1957 will be impressed with the number of publications sponsored by private book clubs and typographic associations. These volumes are designed and printed by the owners of private presses or by the better known commercial printing establishments with reputations for superior work. Since 1946, clubs like the Grolier Club (New York), The Rowfant Club (Cleveland), The Caxton Club (Chicago), The Zamorano Club (Los Angeles), The Club of Odd Volumes (Boston), The Roxburghe Club (San Francisco), and The Book Club of California have been particularly active and successful.

Usually book club publications appear in limited editions and are reserved for members, but occasionally some copies are made available to libraries and non-members, at somewhat higher prices. Some libraries arrange for the acquisition of these volumes through regular members who may be associated with the friends of libraries organizations.

The Limited Editions Club and The Heritage Club permit library memberships, and qualify as publishers of collector's editions. Many college, university, and metropolitan public libraries have acquired complete collections of their books, which are frequently new translations or scholarly texts especially prepared for their subscribers.

The Limited Editions Club, operating since 1929, was founded by George Macy. Its books are designed by some of the world's outstanding printers and illustrated, especially for the Club, by leading
artists. The membership is limited to 1,500 subscribers and normally, the members receive twelve books a year. The members may pay in advance or as each book is published; those paying in advance are allowed a moderate discount on the publications of that year.

The international character of the publications distributed by the Club is one of the notable features. Some of the outstanding printing houses in France, Germany, Great Britain, Sweden, China, Japan, Spain, Italy, Holland, Russia, and Czechoslovakia have contributed a wide variety of books, beautifully illustrated by native artists, and issued in the English and occasionally in a foreign language. Among the illustrators one can find such dissimilar and familiar artists as Eric Gill, Henri Matisse, Rockwell Kent, E. A. Wilson, W. A. Dwiggins, Miguel Covarrubias, Valenti Angelo, John Austen, Fritz Kredel, André Derain, and Graham Sutherland.

The Heritage Club, with its publications designed for limited budgets, can be considered as the impecunious collector’s imitation of the Limited Editions Club. By means of direct mail and magazine advertising, thousands of readers are reached who can acquire less costly editions of many of the same books. The Heritage Club reproduces the same texts and illustrations on cheaper paper by the offset process bound with less expensive materials. Individual Heritage books, priced from $2.50 to $3.95 per volume, cost less than a third of Limited Editions Club releases but present good values, although certain bibliophiles will not admit them to their special collections of costlier or more desirable items.

Included among the books published by the private presses operating during the post World War II period are many reprints of the past, including classical and familiar writings like Voltaire’s Candide, Montaigne’s Essays, Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, Mrs. Browning’s Sonnets From the Portuguese, Aesop’s Fables, and Dante’s Divine Comedy.

Sometimes the writings of contemporary authors are published, often illustrated by talented artists, like Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath, Alexander Calder’s Fables, William Everson’s Privacy of Speech, James Stephens’ Crock of Gold, Robert Frost’s Complete Poems, Adrian Wilson’s Printing for Theatre, and Dorothy Abbe’s edition of W. A. Dwiggins’ Prelude to Eden, published by Puterschein-Hingham.

An active field of publication in recent years has been exploited by various book clubs and private presses by issuing reprints of early travels, overland narratives, and frontier journals. These are usually

[61]
scholarly editions, with illustrations, maps and photographs, all of which appeal to collectors of Americana and local history. In this class are such books as Benton’s *Visit to Chicago* printed by The Prairie Press for the Caxton Club, *The Peyote Ritual* with illustrations by a gifted Indian artist printed by the Grabhorn Press, *The Malibu* by W. W. Robinson and L. C. Powell with illustrations by Irene Robinson, printed by the Plantin Press and Robinson Jeffer’s *Themes in my Poems*, printed by Mallette Dean.

Frequently these books have regional appeal and as they usually reach an audience of between three hundred and a thousand, the unit price per book is somewhat higher than might be the case with a regular trade edition published for wider distribution. However, the quality of the printing and the materials used is frequently superior to those found in the popular trade book.

Of the fifty-six printers, designers, presses and publishers whose works are listed in Will Ransom’s *Selective Check Lists of Press Books* (1945–1950) about 50 per cent are from England and the Continent. Of the American presses listed, the following have been active during the recent decade. The Allen Press, formerly the L-D Allen Press; The Book Club of California, which commissions various presses such as the Grabhorn Press, Lawton Kennedy, Adrian Wilson, Black Vine Press, The Greenwood Press, Mallette Dean and others to design and print its books; The Cummington Press which moved from Massachusetts to Iowa in 1956; The Grolier Club which sponsors publications printed by various presses; Victor Hammer whose recent books have been printed by Jacob Hammer and issued by the Anvil Press at Lexington, Kentucky; The Overbrook Press, Frank Altschul’s very active and qualified enterprise; The Oriole Press of Joseph Ishill of New Jersey; J. D. Hart’s Press in Berkeley, California, which rarely offers its publications for sale; The Prairie Press of Carroll Coleman, formerly of Muscatine and now of Iowa City, working also at the University of Iowa; The Spiral Press, Joseph Blumenthal’s important and long-established press now located in New York City; The Typophiles whose members include many of the most talented and productive designers and printers in the country, as well as librarians and collectors and whose Chap Books and other printing distributed to members have been under the direction of P. A. Bennett since 1935; and the Heritage and Limited Editions Club books which qualify for inclusion because many private presses have produced their books.

Of the dozen names mentioned above, four are of organizations
Private Presses and Collector’s Editions

which do not actually produce their own books. In addition, the bibliophilic and typographic organizations, i.e., Caxton, Rowfant, Club of Odd Volumes, Zamorano, Roxburghe, Philobiblon, and the Westerners, as well as Beta Phi Mu, the Library Science Scholastic Honorary, are instrumental in the distribution of collector’s editions.

It is not easy to obtain information from the trade journals about the private book club publications and the editions issued by the more specialized private presses. There are periodicals issued for book-collectors and typophiles which impart this information to interested librarians and collectors. Among these journals should be mentioned, The Book Club of California Quarterly News Letter, The Book Collector, Print, Graphis, Printing and Graphic Arts, Antiquarian Bookman, and Typographica. Book-dealers specializing in these materials are also valuable sources of contact, as they help to keep collectors informed about projected editions which will be limited in supply. Their names and addresses are listed in the Bookman’s Yearbook published by Antiquarian Bookman and the annual volumes of American Book-Prices Current, as well as in the above mentioned journals.

Librarians frequently encounter difficulties when attempting to acquire collector’s editions because these items are limited in supply and critical reviews often do not appear until after the editions are sold out. Notices concerning these books are found only rarely in the more popular magazines and journals providing book information and advertising is also rather uncommon since private presses and publishing book clubs cannot afford promotion which would not bring sufficient sales to justify the expense.

The Will Ransom Records at the Newberry Library in Chicago contain valuable data not available elsewhere. The collection consists of 151 loose leaf binders which contain historical and bibliographical information on private presses and their personnel. In addition there are forty-six large filing boxes filled with prospectuses, descriptions, ephemera of all sorts, and Ransom’s correspondence with artists, printers, designers, and publishers which provides the documentary sources for his researches which covered a period of over fifty years.3

The result of Ransom’s earlier labors appeared in his Private Presses and Their Books which presents the history and development of the subject and a definitive list of the books and miscellaneous printing produced by hundreds of private presses in the United States and abroad, prior to 1929. For the more recent information about the
presses established after that date his Selective Check Lists of Press Books,\(^5\) issued in twelve parts, 1945–1950 is useful. Thomas Rae of the Signet Press in Greenock, Scotland, in association with Geoffrey Handley-Taylor, is preparing a detailed checklist of all existing private presses in the English-speaking world which will help bring their fragmentary record more up to date.\(^6\)

Since the publications of private presses and collector’s editions are not in the main stream of American book production, one cannot expect that the future will change conditions experienced during the past decade. The current emphasis on cheaper editions and paperbacks makes it unlikely that the private presses’ output will increase because they are primarily designed for the luxury market and will appeal only to those who understand and appreciate the urge to collect books which are more than vehicles of communication, published to provide amusement or diversion for the majority of readers who are seldom aware of the format of the books they read. Librarians are faced with the financial problems and responsibility of preserving examples of good printing, fine typography, and the ephemera produced by the outstanding printers of the present and the past. They have to make choices and exercise their ingenuity in order to balance the values involved.

The finest examples of private press books and collector’s editions, intelligently conceived and artistically produced, reflect the understanding and development of a craft which has been one of the important influences in the cultural history of mankind.

References


ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Private Presses and Collector's Editions


