

## SPINNING FORWARD AND EASTWARD

David Latham

*As an example of typography, the earliest book printed with movable type, the Gutenberg, or "forty-two line Bible" of about 1455, has never been surpassed.*

– William Morris, "Printing"

During this thirtieth anniversary of our *Journal*, the early issues from the 1970s remind me of the technological changes each generation has faced since the Victorians first felt their world spinning at an irreversible momentum, as expressed by Tennyson in "Locksley Hall" – "Forward, forward let us range, / Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change" – and by Hardy in *Far from the Madding Crowd*: "To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement." How easy it is for most of us to relate in our own small ways.

As an undergraduate in the 1970s at Acadia University amid the arcadian countryside of apple and pear orchards in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia, I happily wrote an honours thesis on Swinburne's poetry. I was required to type my forty pages with two sheets of carbon paper because three copies were needed and there lingered a distrust of photocopy machines whose pages it was feared would fade. The tradition and formality of the honours thesis at a small school demanded the permanence of smudged-looking carbon copies, which had passed the test of time.

We are supposed to grow, develop, mature, and change with experience, but the older I grow the more I find I stay the same. With our laptop computers at our office desks, Kristine and I prepare camera-ready copy for the printing of the *Journal*, and yet I still feel excited by the arrival of each new shipment twice a year: the knock at the door, unloading the truck, and filling two rooms with boxes stacked like bales of hay. I open the first box, feel the cover, and smell the Spring or the Fall issue. It is not the scent of lilacs in spring or of wet

leaves in autumn. It is the pungent scent of fresh printer's ink. Computers technically enable everyone to be a desktop publisher, but software programs encourage a generic uniformity of layout that is not at all what Morris, Ashbee, Ricketts, and others who worked in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition of book design intended. Nevertheless, the Pre-Raphaelite influence is not lost, as artists still practise their craft with small-press books. Die-hard printers every year in May travel to the village of Grimsby in the Niagara vineyards south of Toronto for an exhibition and a Wayzgoose dinner. It is a Mayday festival for those who love to breathe the scent of ink.

I set my first type in grade school, where I imagine much also has changed. For an hour each day we were segregated by gender, as the boys were taught trade skills in wood-shop and print-shop classes, and the girls were taught domestic skills in baking and sewing classes. I learned to set lines of words on a compositor's stick with lead type from wooden type-cases; I learned to dampen paper overnight, lock formes on an imposing-stone, and roll out a dab of ink on an ink-block. These compositing skills learned at school in the late 1960s would have prepared us at best for employment at a country newspaper during its last romantic days before being purchased and modernized by a national chain. A century earlier in Victorian Britain the book trade was already industrialized to the point that when the Pre-Raphaelites sought to revive the craft of fine printing, their efforts would be called the "private-press movement," yet another revolutionary movement they launched against their industrial age.

As a graduate student I tinkered with lead-and-tin type again, this time in the library at York University where William Whitla had set up the Erlin Press after rescuing some nineteenth-century equipment from an old printing firm in Toronto. Fellow student Michael Darling and I were determined to typeset an unpublished and uncatalogued manuscript by Swinburne from the McGill University library. It is a handwritten story called "The Statue of John Brute," accompanied by a misleading letter by T.J. Wise, who sought to assign more importance to the story by identifying it with Swinburne's projected *Triameron*. After selecting our font and justifying a number of lines on our compositor's sticks, we discovered that we had only enough type for a single page; we thus printed one page at a time, redistributing the type for one page in order to set the next. Each page of print is thus awkwardly crooked or darker or lighter alongside its facing page. It was a humbling lesson in apprenticeship.

My next printing exercise began a season later at Kelmscott House, Morris's Hammersmith residence on the Thames where for five years scholars were invited to live while studying Morris. My wife and I stayed there as students for two heavenly summers, living the kind of communal life that Morris had envisioned for Red House. After Sheila catalogued its library we printed bookplates with Morris's Golden type on his primrose-watermarked

paper, in the simple, three-line style that Morris had done for Edward Burne-Jones, Walter Crane, and other friends:

FROM THE LIBRARY AT  
 KELMSCOTT HOUSE ✿  
 HAMMERSMITH ✿✿✿

We printed them on his Albion press and flour-pasted them into each book. Printing the Swinburne manuscript had taught me to appreciate the skilled craftsmanship I would never master. Printing the modest bookplates on Morris's Albion press in his Kelmscott House inspired us to feel that we shared a part of the tradition of the Arts and Crafts community. Sheila and I have always felt that the experience of those days living at Kelmscott House was one that changed our lives.

A change of values, of attitude, of commitment is different from changes in technology. The internet has changed the methods of our scholarly research, much of what we used to call "footwork." The internet is now the primary resource for our reference questions and for downloading texts on paper, but we should be wary of relying on it for studying information through the medium of the screen itself. Marshall McLuhan characterized the printed page as a hot medium and the television screen as a cool medium, the page requiring active engagement from the reader, while the screen invites passive reception from the viewer. It is well documented that we cannot proofread our sentences and paragraphs on a computer screen with any adequate degree of accuracy; it may then follow that electronic print cannot be read carefully with the responsible engagement that a complex text demands.

Futurists are predicting that print on paper will long remain the most reliable medium for the preservation of archives because the technological machinery for microfilm and microcards, for spool-reel and eight-track tapes, for videotapes and DVDs, for floppy disks and CDs and USB flash-drives, grows obsolete from one decade to the next. Those early issues of *The Pre-Raphaelite Review* in the 1970s were printed in the large 8-by-11-inch format because they reproduced the image of a typescript page from a manual typewriter. When *The Pre-Raphaelite Review* would arrive in the post, I was living in my first apartment where the central focus was a burlap-covered orange-crate on which was set, not a television, but a record player. Beside it was a bookcase; I placed those tall issues of the journal on the bottom shelf of my bookcase, the shelf that was otherwise reserved for vinyl-record albums. A decade or so later I could no longer play the records because my old turn-table had begun to spin too fast.