

Making Books . . . and Chili

DAVID ESSELMONT cooked the books (so to speak) on October 2, 2013, when he addressed those gathered for the presentation of the Alcuin Society's Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver.

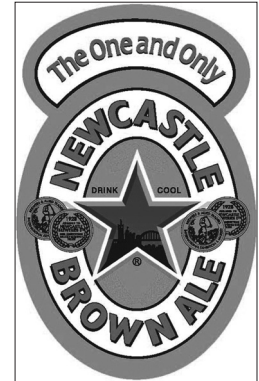
I HAVE AN INTEREST in books. You have an interest in books. Actually, I find everybody has an interest in books of some sort. I have an interest in food too—and I have also found that everybody has an interest in food.

I think chefs and book designers have a lot in common. We are designing, creating, directing—orchestrating—a wide range of different elements, and overseeing their production, often as multiples. Aren't we both obsessed with detail, with the quality of the materials or ingredients, the production, the presentation? Aren't we looking for that perfect balance?

Tonight I am going to talk about creativity, inspiration and how our heritage, and our traditions, hindsight and insight help shape the work we create—how what we do today may well be a continuation of earlier work, and why not? National Public Radio broadcaster Garrison Keillor agrees; he once told me: "I've been writing about the same damn town in Minnesota for over 30 years."

Serendipity and hard work create works of genius—remember the 1 percent inspiration, 99 percent perspiration theory attributed to Thomas Edison. Occasionally something happens, let us call it the "aha! moment," a "eureka" moment (*à la* Archimedes), and a solution presents itself, we get an insight that leads us—inspires us—to "think outside the box" and create something extraordinary.

As I look around today at the burgeoning book arts scene, I wonder, what are these folks going to do with all the things they're creating? The book arts student and I believe book designers should study all aspects of the history of books and printing, literature, science, philosophy and the arts, they must practise again, and again and again, and they must seek first-hand knowledge from experts. And they must also



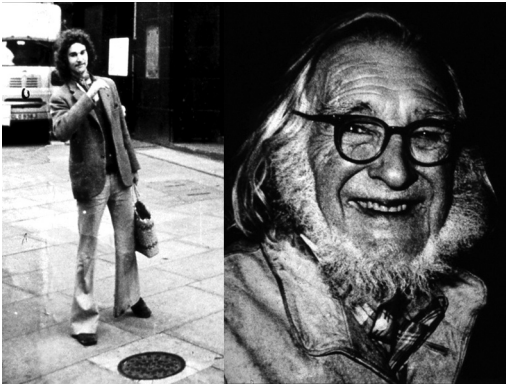
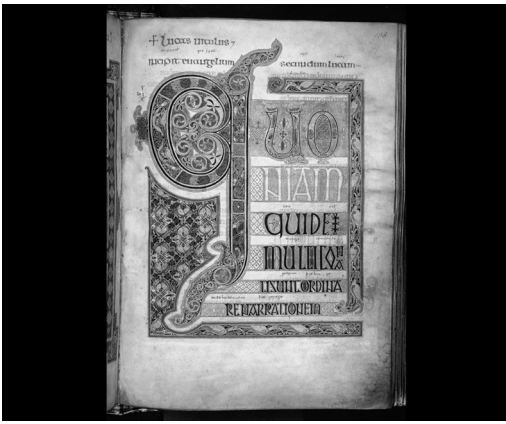
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David Esslemont's visual heritage includes everything from the Lindisfarne Gospels to railway posters and the label for Newcastle Brown Ale.

learn about publishing. Which itself requires creative thinking and business expertise.

HERITAGE

During the last American presidential election, I noticed that many politicians would tell you where they were born and about their grandparents—they bragged about their heritage. I am not going to spell out where I was born—it's easy to work that out—but I will talk a little about my heritage which I believe shapes my work. Here on a British Rail poster from the 1940s we have some bold, clear typography set in Gill Sans, Eric Gill's sans serif typeface. These are the same letterforms we were taught to draw in high school. They are part of my visual heritage, as is the label of Newcastle's eponymous beer.

The Lindisfarne Gospels, a manuscript made around the year [AD] 700 on a small island off the coast of Northumberland, in the northeast of England, also has special significance for me because it represents the cultural heritage that shapes my work: it was made in



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Top: A page from the Lindisfarne Gospels.
Bottom left: David Esslemont outside the Central School. Bottom right: Blair Hughes-Stanton.

Northumberland; it has Anglo Saxon elements, and it is illustrated in a style containing a fusion of Celtic, Germanic and Roman elements.

TEACHERS & TRADITIONS

Here I am, the artist as a young man, outside the Central School of Art and Design in London. Alongside me is Blair Hughes-Stanton, who taught relief printmaking—that is, woodcut, linocut and wood engraving.

The Central School was an outcome of the Arts and Crafts movement of which William Morris and Emery Walker were key figures. Others players were J.H. Mason, Noel Rooke, Edward Johnston, and Douglas Cockerell taught in the school of book production. Who knows these names? By the time I was a student, book production was no longer an option. Many of my tutors were colourful characters, as we shall

see, and they all taught me memorable lessons. Chief among them was Blair Hughes-Stanton.

It seemed Hughes-Stanton possessed a single set of clothes, as he always wore the same yellow corduroy pants, old misshapen shoes, a rust-red sweater and yellow-ochre shirt, an old, stained, leather waistcoat and a short tweed overcoat, and he carried with him a yellow-leather bag that contained his pajamas and a bottle of whisky.

The lessons from Day 1 were paramount. Linoleum was no longer a cold, rough slab that was cut with blunt niblike chisels or printed with thick ink resembling treacle. The linocut is, it transpires, a medium of enormous potential, capable of the finest subtleties—if you have the right tools and learn a few tricks.

Hughes-Stanton showed us a few of the books he had illustrated with wood engravings in the 1930s. Among them were some printed at the Gregynog Press in Wales. *The Revelation of Saint John the Divine* and *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* are both tall slim volumes full of astonishing wood engravings.

Hughes-Stanton's extraordinary vision upset some people, breaking away as it did from traditional Christian iconography. One reviewer said, "There is in the wild sanity of this astounding book [*Revelation*] something very close to the texture of Mr Stanton's own mind."

After three tempestuous years at Gregynog, Hughes-Stanton set up his own Gemini Press, and many years later he gave me all his type, most of which was 24-point Blado Italic.

I learned more lessons when he asked me to help him print at his home in Manningtree—how to mix copperplate oil with printing ink; how to roll out a consistent, even film of ink with a hand roller; how to balance the weight of the roller when inking the blocks; how much ink to apply; how to choose the best paper; the intricacies of make-ready; and how to gauge the necessary pressure needed to get the best print, with the least amount of ink.

He seemed recalcitrant, but looking back it was my lack of knowledge. I didn't know what there was to know. When I asked him what he remembered about his time at Gregynog, all he said was, "Three years of bloody rain!" Of the Davies sisters: "Oh, they didn't know anything

about printing and never came in the press.” But he did show me books, and how to print, and for that I am ever grateful. How a man in his 70s could ever pull a hand press handle like he did, I don’t know. “Get your leg up on the rails,” he would say. “Grip the handle, swing back and drop your bottom at the same time.”

And there were lessons in living too, especially eating and drinking. His wife Anne was a formidable cook: I tried sheep’s brains first in Manningtree, coffee from French bowls, Angostura bitters, and I learned the addictive rhythms of cribbage.

Among my other tutors were Cecil Collins and Hans Tisdall. Collins cut a peculiar figure—he always wore a coat that looked more like a cape, and wore a trilby hat from under which peered his birdlike face. I shall always remember the day he commented on one of my woodcuts, raising his spectacles to look closely at the print. “Mmm,” he said. “It’s a good black—you’ve got a flair for woodcuts.”

The other colourful character was Hans Tisdall, who taught one day a week. At the time I had no idea then he was a lettering artist whose distinctive script has adorned many a book jacket. Hemingway insisted that all his English editions carry Tisdall jackets. He spoke with a German accent and once said to me: “Esslemont, I like zee nuances of colour in your painting.” I had no idea, either, at the time that this artist was a master of colour.

After college I embarked on a comprehensive “artist’s tour” of Italy, travelling from Venice to



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The Old Man and the Sea jacket by Hans Tisdall.

Ravenna through Tuscany and Umbria to Rome and down to Naples and back again. Italy is where I learned how to eat—and where I first discovered the importance and potential of three simple ingredients: tomato, garlic and olive oil.

Returning to Newcastle, I began my letterpress apprenticeship: printing by hand on a cylinder press a whole range of ephemera, such as trade union membership cards, clothes labels and posters, such as this, where I freely mixed the 24-point Blado Italic with other typefaces.

I developed an interest in the history of books and printing and learned about the European pioneers such as Gutenberg, Aldus Manutius, Antonio Blado and Nicolas Jenson, whose 1476 edition of Pliny’s *Natural History*, printed in Venice, is quite simply an inspiration. And then I began printing books . . .

Thomas Bewick’s best-known books are *A General History of Quadrupeds* [1790] and *A History of British Birds* [1797–1804]. Bewick was a pioneer too; his engravings on boxwood blocks were the most lifelike that had ever been made. And they could be printed with metal type.

His tailpiece vignettes combine a remarkable eye for detail with a narrative, which is often foreboding and sometimes scatological. They are remarkable records of life in rural England at the end of the 18th century.

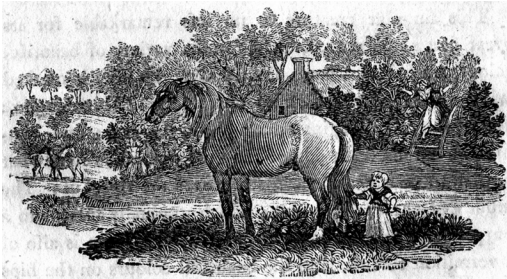
I discovered there was a collection of original Bewick woodblocks in Newcastle City Library and thought, “Aha.” If I could print these, I could make a book to commemorate the sesquicentenary of Bewick’s death in 1828. I convinced the librarian of my credentials and was given permission to print them. Before long I acquired a large Columbian hand press and all the necessary trinkets described by Joseph Moxon in his *Mechanick Exercises* (1683).

My plan was to publish the book in quarter- and full-leather bindings, but the cost was so prohibitive I decided to do it myself and set about learning how to bind books properly (I had been creating full-leather bindings, using shoe leather, for my sketchbooks and notebooks since I was a student).

There is something magical about gold tooling, isn’t there? I went on to print and bind four volumes of engravings by Bewick and his school. For



Gregynog Hall in Mid Wales.



Top left: Portrait of Thomas Bewick. Top right: A Bewick engraving of the Golden Eagle. Bottom: A Bewick tailpiece vignette.

this red goatskin binding on *John Bewick* I also engraved the brass tools. The other book is *Luke Clennell: Bewick Apprentice*. Someone told me they thought the binding had Celtic undertones. Actually it was inspired by one of the bindings on a book from Mardersteig's Officina Bodoni.

I had found my *métier*, and with considerable zest I began learning everything I could about traditional letterpress printing on the hand press and about hand binding. However, my business acumen was lacking, and I would soon discover that this belief that one might learn to do everything single-handed is just one of the many perils of being self-employed.

My weakness for DIY led me to learn bricklaying, roofing, plumbing, electrical and a host of other building skills, all of which I enjoyed immensely, but none of which became money-making ventures. Because of the urgent need to cover my costs as soon as possible, I often only printed half an edition, intending to complete the run at a later date, which of course I didn't. I can now say with hindsight that was a mistake.

THE GREGYNOG PRESS

After printing and binding half a dozen books, and restoring a Victorian house to its former splendid glory, I left Newcastle upon Tyne and moved to Wales to take up the post of controller, or director, of the Gregynog Press.

Gwendoline and Margaret Davies founded the press in 1922 here at their home, Gregynog Hall, in Mid Wales. Over the course of 20 years they published around 40 finely printed and bound editions, in both English and Welsh, in the grand private press tradition. Ultimately, the press closed as the market for fine books declined with the outbreak of war in 1939. The sisters bequeathed Gregynog Hall and the entire estate to the University of Wales, and it is now a conference centre.

The press was reopened in the late 1970s as a limited company owned by the university, and I first went there for a printing history conference in 1984. Visiting the press I crossed the portals as if entering the Sistine Chapel. There was an atmosphere redolent with creativity—intoxicating aromas of ink, solvents and machine oil. Little did I know that within a year I would be in charge.

Moving to Wales was a move to another country. I had no idea Welsh was spoken by nearly 20 percent of the population, or that the road signs would be bilingual, or that I would be asked to design and print books in a foreign language.

My first challenge was *Cerddi Saunders Lewis*, a collection of poems by Saunders Lewis, who was a leading literary and political icon in Wales. Lewis died the month before I started working on this book—perhaps he'd heard that a young Englishman was tinkering with his verse!

Faced with the challenge of designing a book I couldn't read, I took the optimist's approach and saw it as an opportunity for creative typography. I could arrange the words, lines and blocks of type on the page to make the most satisfying design. With Saunders Lewis turning in his grave, it was not long before the editor, and others, very gently made me aware that these words did mean something to a lot of people, and on no account was I to take typographical liberties with the Welsh language.

I have fond memories of family holidays on farms in Wales and a sheepdog called Tydyma. I soon discovered all the sheepdogs in Wales are called Tydyma. I started to learn Welsh and learned that *tydyma* means "Come here."

One afternoon at the press a visitor was having a conversation in Welsh with my colleague. I listened closely. It was teatime, and pouring a cup, I boldly asked our visitor, "Dych eisau paned?" (Do you want a cup [of tea]?) He said something that I took to mean no, so I sat down and drank the tea myself. Behind him, my colleague's jaw dropped—and he hastily poured another cup of tea. Later I discovered his reply, roughly translated, was: "By God, yes! I am absolutely parched. I could murder a cup of tea!" So I discovered that "A little learning is a dangerous thing."

Luckily, the next book, *The Mountains of Wales*, was an anthology in verse and prose that gave me an introduction to both the language and literature of Wales.

The book designer, John Ryder, had been asked to design the book before I joined the press, and so I had an opportunity of working with a master. Ryder's ability to visualize the printed page and draw precise instructions for its layout seemed extraordinary, although once he sent a proof back marked "This looks like a dog's dinner." He possessed a remarkable awareness of and sensitivity to the space around letters, words and paragraphs.

Ryder found an interesting analogy in an architectural review by Fiona MacCarthy. "The Italians," she wrote, "knew by instinct what we are slowly grasping, that the meaning of the city is not so much a matter of the buildings as the spaces in between." His comment was: "This is exactly how typography works." How true is

that? I would add that the same applies in the visual arts as well as in music and literature, where silence and intervals are essential tools.

I learned a great deal from John Ryder, particularly about legibility, readability and visual editing. And never again will I design a contents page with page numbers ranged right and the text ranged left.

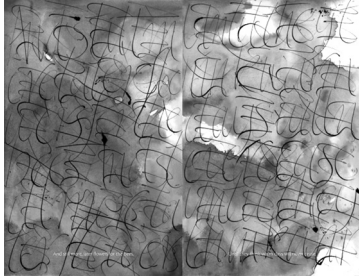
My first visit to the United States was in 1990, for a book arts conference in New York. I was looking for an illustrator for *Wrenching Times*, Gregynog's edition of Walt Whitman's poems from *Drum-Taps*. Besides many other great book people, I met the wood engraver and printer Gaylord Schanilec, and invited him to come to Wales and illustrate the Whitman book. He responded with a characteristic slow, drawn-out "Gee . . . I don't know." I'm not sure he had even heard of Wales, let alone the Gregynog Press. But the next day he agreed to have a look at the text; apparently, a friend who knew of the press had been told of my invitation and said to Schanilec: "Gregynog asked you to illustrate a book, and you said no—are you crazy?" Such was the reputation of Gregynog.

Gaylord was resident at Gregynog for six months, during which time he made his colour wood engravings for the book. The creative atmosphere that must have existed at the press in the 1930s was rekindled and we became best friends.

I felt Gwasg Gregynog should do more than just print and publish books. I dreamt the press could be at the heart of something like an international centre for the book arts, but it became clear the university did not share my vision, and in 1997 I left Gregynog to return to the precarious occupation of freelance designer, printer, bookbinder and publisher. In a dozen years I had learned a great deal about printing, book design and publishing, and about business management.

BOOKS POST GREGYNOG

I continued to print, and bind, and moved from metal type to polymer plates and embraced the rapidly growing digital world. Ironically, I also restored a 19th-century Wharfedale cylinder press to working condition, on which I printed some substantial books!



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Top: Special binding for
The Wood Engravings of David Gentleman.
Bottom: Esslemont's paintings for "To Autumn."

My deluxe bindings became more painterly: *The Wood Engravings of David Gentleman* uses white alum-tawed goatskin, which is not only very durable but is also an excellent canvas for my design, created here with stencils, acrylic ink and toothbrushes. This was a 150-page book and contains over 300 wood engravings, almost all printed from the original blocks on the Wharfedale. I won a couple of awards for this book.

A collaboration with Schanilec, *Ink on the Elbow* (2003), marked a turning point. I began to spend increasing amounts of time in America. Now, to quote another Geordie, the rock star Sting: "I'm a legal alien," living not in New York but in rural Iowa.

Before moving to America I was an artist-in-residence with the Wordsworth Trust at Grasmere in the English Lake District. While I was at Grasmere I made many watercolour paintings and drawings, working towards a new illustrated edition of Wordsworth's epic poem *The Prelude*.

Then I moved to Minneapolis, set up shop and bought a small Heidelberg cylinder on which to print *The Prelude*. The illustrations are ink-jet prints of details from the same watercolour seen on the special binding. The white alum-tawed goatskin was again my canvas, except this time the image is printed on the leather.

With the English Romantic poets in mind, it seemed natural that I should follow Wordsworth with Keats and his poem "To Autumn" with its memorable first line, "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness."

These paintings are again details from a larger image, a photograph I'd taken one autumn in Minneapolis, looking up into a tree. My calligraphy is not good, and I discovered that lyrical letterforms written around and across and over in various ways disguised the flaws. On each page I've drawn one line from the poem. For the book, which is printed digitally, I added the line as text reversed out in white. The paintings or drawings, perhaps "calligrams," were created as facing pages.

Seen all together, the bigger picture is revealed in a fractured montage, some nine feet tall. The fall colours in Minnesota and Wisconsin can be spectacular. In fact, fall colours throughout the world can be spectacular, can't they? With this book (and the paintings) I continued to move away from the traditional, conventional letterpress fine printed book to a more personal expression, in the form of the "artist's book."

FOOD-RELATED BOOKS

For some time, I had been looking for a food-related subject that I could turn into an interesting book. Last year I won a chili cook-off. You're thinking, "What does an Englishman know about chili?" Well, I like spicy food, and Indian curry is Britain's favourite cuisine. Besides, the chili cook-offs are a lot of fun, especially when they are held in your neighbour's winery—and yes, we grow something else in Iowa besides corn and beans.

I worked hard; it took me three years and countless experiments. I came close to poisoning the family. But as soon as I put aside the chili powders and learned to make toasted ancho chili paste, I knew I was on to something.

Shortly after I was crowned Chili Champion, young Russell Maret and his wife Annie came to visit. He brought his latest exquisite book, *Specimens*—simply astonishing; in fact, all his work is astonishing. Russell and I share a passion for food and cooking, and although he does not consider himself a food snob, he is a gourmand, so is Annie, and I worried about what to feed them. The obvious choice was

handmade pizza in my wood-fired hand-built adobe clay oven (which tragically burned down a couple of weeks later). And of course, they requested some prize-winning chili, which they ate for supper and breakfast!

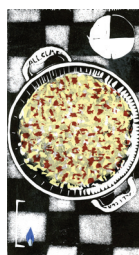
The day after Russell left, I knew what my next book would be, and I began to cut a series of rough, vigorous images in plywood, barn boards and other scrap pieces of wood and made messy hand prints. I wanted them to be as far removed as possible from Russell's immaculate, precision printing. The subject: my recipe for the chili. Over the year this became a series of 39 woodcuts that predictably grew more complicated and detailed as I began cutting hard maple blocks. I did not want to print text alongside the images, so I contrived pictograms for the quantities and cooking directions.

Progress was documented on Facebook and the prints gained an encouraging amount of interest, at the same time whetting people's appetites in more ways than one!

Unfortunately the Heidelberg never made it to Iowa, and in the end I had no choice but to sell it and had no means of printing the blocks! Adapting the engineer's press, seen here in the background—which I used when binding as a nipping press—with rails, a bed, tympan and frisket, I created a little hand press and set to work editing the woodcuts. Some required up to 10 runs through the press, and I combined a range of different techniques: pochoir, à la poupée, multiple rollers and pressure printing. Some blocks were used in more than one image, some were rotated and printed three times using cunning overlays and make-ready. It was quite an adventure.

As always I created a deluxe binding, not in my favourite white alum-tawed goatskin, as none was available, but in alum-tawed pig (the leather was a swine to pare, by the way), which I blind tooled to create a white linen tablecloth, the perfect setting for a bowl of chili garnished with spicy sour cream, scallions and julienned Fresno, habanero and jalapenos chilies.

So there we are. I hope I have demonstrated that what we do is shaped by our heritage and traditions, and that we learn as much from teachers and friends as we do from our students.



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Top: Pictograms for recipes.
Bottom: Deluxe binding for Chili Recipe.

Will I do another food-related book? Yes. I am surrounded by a culture of local food in Iowa, and this is becoming part of my culture too—my culture of creativity and books. I have become a passionate locavore, and it might be said that agri-culture too is now shaping my work since I began farming. Ever mindful of the market for my work, I find that chili is not quite as popular outside of North America—perhaps the British would prefer a curry recipe.

I am thinking the title of my next book might be *Bread*. It begins with preparing the ground, planting the grain and tending the crop, and explores the harvesting, processing and baking and would—I hope—have global appeal. Which leads me to the absurd notion that I could grow an entire book on the farm: grow flax, make paper, harvest maple trees for woodblocks. Pigments abound. The only stumbling block would be a varnish or vehicle for the inks. I'll have to Google that. And of course, half a dozen goats for the bindings.

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 ~ David Esslemont is an award-winning British artist, designer, printer, bookbinder and publisher now living in Iowa, where, when not growing food or making chili, he runs Solmentes Press.