

## Change and continuity

*Jan and Crispin Elsted were honoured with the Robert R. Reid Award and Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Book Arts in Canada at the annual general meeting of the Alcuin Society in Vancouver on June 8, 2015. While Jan rounded up some of the recent major projects of the press, Crispin reflected on the changes in fine press printing over the past four decades. The following is an edited extract from his remarks.*

IT OCCURS TO ME that it's interesting to look at some of the differences from 1977, when we started doing what we do, to now.

Talking to people who are just starting to print, or have only started to print in the last 10 years or so, it's interesting to see their eyebrows continue to rise that in 1977, in England, when we began to print, we found a place that had 11 Albion presses for sale standing in the works yard of the shop. You could go into London, to the area of Holborn around King Street, and go into any number of shops and buy type off the shelf.

You could buy, in a shop called Printer's Pie—"printer's pie," by the way, is a printing term for what happens when you drop a load of type on the floor—all the wonderful little gadgets that printers have in their shops: composing sticks, tweezers, setting rules, all that kind of stuff. Again, you could walk in and just pick stuff off the shelf and buy it. That idea is simply inconceivable now to anyone who's doing the kind of work we do.

There's no such shop anywhere [now]. The best thing that can happen, in the saddest sort of way, is that someone who has had [such] a shop decides to give it up and sends out a notice that people, if they want to come and buy



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*Jan and Crispin Elsted honoured at the Alcuin Society annual general meeting in June 2015.  
(Lumi Constantin photo)*

some type or some typefaces, may. And then, you see, people come out of the woodwork.

But more important, the whole readership of books has shifted, markedly, since 1977. Thirty-eight years ago you could pretty well expect that anyone who was even remotely interested in reading would be interested in reading books that were beautifully produced. Nobody ever said, "Why is this book beautiful?" But we've been asked that ourselves in recent years. "Why do you bother to make it so beautiful? All you need is a paperback." I think everyone in this room knows the answer to that (it's pleasant, very pleasant, to be able to stand in front of a room of people who do understand what that's all about).

But I think it's important, too, to realize that we've had to come to grips with this ourselves one way or another over the past few years: while the book is certainly not dead or dying—another thing that's nice about this room of people is that they don't have to be persuaded of the truth of that—it is finding different readers, and it is losing some of the readers it had. And the reason we publish many of the things we do is because concomitant with that fact is the fact that many people, even literate people who read a great deal, have lost track of the canon of English literature, or literature in English.

The other thing is that poems which are new poems—poems by contemporary poets—don't, unfortunately, get the kind of attention now from presses like ours that they used to. It's extremely important that new poets be heard and that they have their work presented in a form which is both readable and beautiful.

The motto of our press is a phrase from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, *utile dulci*, "the useful and the beautiful." The things seem to us to be intertwined; they're not separate at all. If something is beautiful it has a particular use, and if it's useful it has a beauty in that usefulness. So a contemporary poet who is trying to find an audience—and it's increasingly difficult in this country, and I would imagine other countries, too—used to be able to find some hope in small presses like ours.

In San Francisco, for example, in the 1940s, '50s, '60s, people like Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac and Robert Duncan had their poetry first printed by small presses in

basements and garages. They weren't beautifully printed but they were printed with passion, and they were distributed all over the place among people who really cared about the work.

Our problem—there's not much we can do about it—is that we've reached the stage, economically, simply in terms of survival, where we can't afford to produce a book of new poetry and sell it at the price that would make it available to people who should be reading it. If we print a book, we pretty well have to charge something well into the three figures for it, even if it's very modest. And very few people are going to pick up a book of new poetry on spec that's going to cost them \$150, no matter how beautiful it may look. That's a worry for us, and I think we may in the future get around it somehow, at some point, by—I can't believe I'm going to say this—putting a computer to work and make some books that way on the side.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

One challenge facing fine printers is determining the right number of copies in a given edition. A rule of thumb is that it's better to sell out a first edition and leave buyers clamouring for more, rather than tie up resources in stock that takes years to sell. During an interview on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Barbarian Press, Jan and Crispin Elsted shared an instructive story.

"We published *A Christmas Carol*, or *The Miser's Warning*, which was a play adaptation of Dickens' story," Jan says of a project undertaken in 1984. "And we commissioned a wood engraver and had an introduction by an academic about the whole business of people writing plays at the time the stories came out. And we had assumed that because there's a huge Dickensian society in the world, there would be people who would want to have this. And there were some people . . . but we did an edition of 350—which is mind-boggling now, when I think about it. I don't ever want to do that again."

"We still have copies," Crispin interjects.

"They trickle away as we show them at fairs and stuff, but we misjudged that audience because we thought they would translate into people who would buy things," Jan continues. "[But] they're more people who are interested in the trivia on Dickens than collecting fine press books. Quite a different audience."

#### SOBER REFLECTIONS

*Prior to receiving the Robert R. Reid Award and Medal on June 8, 2015, Crispin offered his and Jan's thanks for being selected for the honour.*

To be told that one has spent a large part of one's life doing something worthwhile is in the best, and perhaps the most odd sense, sobering. Anyone who does this kind of work will tell you that you spend a lot of time explaining to other people why you're doing what you're doing.

The standard question is, "Why don't you use, y'know, a computer or an offset press do this? What's so special?" Whereupon we drag the poor person into the library and show them a bunch of books, and eventually many of them seem to get it. In fact, some of them have got it so well that when they come to visit us, and [have] done workshops with us, they have gone off and started presses of their own. It's lovely to know that we have managed, somehow, to keep the tradition moving ahead by inspiring other people to do some of the same work.

The generosity in the book community around the world is extraordinary. One of the reasons that we are here tonight, and have had the kind of welcome from you and the very honour of the award that we're going to be given, is because people like you have supported us and cared about books. It's wonderful to find, in any walk of life, a community of people in whom loving-kindness is simply a way of understanding and who support one another.