

The Island of Demons

BY GEORGE WOODCOCK. ILLUS. RAY CATTELL
(HARWOOD PRESS, 1998, 34.0 × 22.8 CM, \$3,000)

2 Blank, Half-Title, Frontispiece, Title, Copyright, Preface by George Woodcock (3 pages not numbered), Text and Illustration (60 pages not numbered) includes 16 images (3 double page) by Ray Cattell, About the Author (1 page), About the Artist by Ray Cattell (1 page), About This Book by Robert Reid (1 page), Colophon, 2 Blank. (Each sheet is folded and not cut and printed on the outer pages, with the inner pages left blank.)

From the Colophon: "This book was designed and produced by Hugh Michaelson in a limited edition of 100 signed and numbered copies. There are an additional 10 copies signed and numbered 1–x. The type was set on a Linotype machine in Caslon Old Face by Robert R. Reid and Mitchell Atlas and printed by Hugh Michaelson on 130 gsm Lana Verge Antique paper using a hand fed Vandercook 219 cylinder press. Photopolymer plates made by R.W. Mann Typesetting, Minden, Ontario. The lithographs were printed at JB Printing, Newmarket, Ontario. The book was hand-sewn and bound by John Van Huizen, St. Catharines, Ontario."

SOME PRIVATE PRESS BOOKS are sold out before publication while others linger in the hands of the printers for no apparent reason. This is one book that is still available. In fact, as I write, it is on display at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto as part of a retrospective of the artistic work of Ray Cattell.

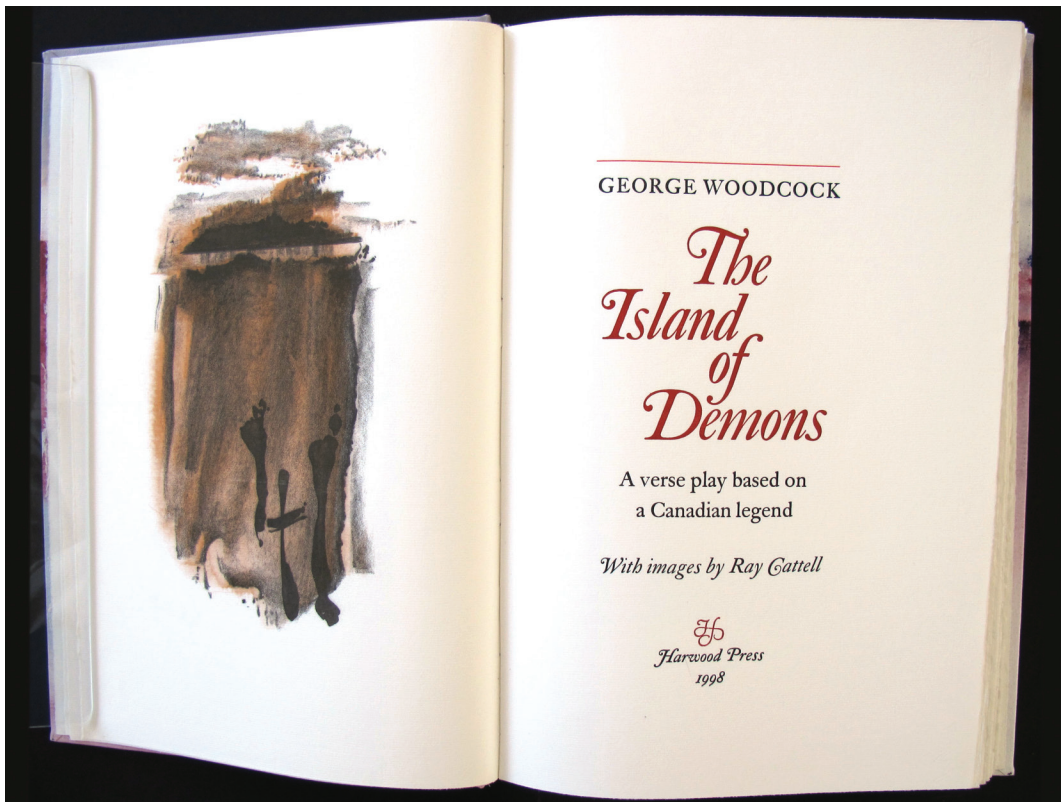
One element that sets this book apart is the cover, which is an original painting by Cattell unique to each copy. Curiously, this is not made clear in the colophon and is only hinted at in the note, "About the Artist," that precedes the colophon. (Accompanying the prospectus for this book is a poster that reproduces each of the 100 covers.) Purchasers get to choose the cover they want, provided it is not already sold.

Ray Cattell is a well-respected artist. He is a member of the Royal Canadian Academy (RCA), Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) and Society of

Canadian Painters in Water Colour (SCPWC). Membership in these groups is by election, a recognition of the member's accomplishments by their peers. This book, at \$3,000, is not an inexpensive book. The price is not out of line with the price of Cattell's paintings included in the exhibition at the Arts and Letters Club, nor is it out of line with the publication prices of some private press books, which are approaching the resale prices of some of the 20th century's landmark private press works.

But the painting by Cattell isn't the only element that makes this volume special. One acquires a book with great stories about its coming into being. The right to print the text was originally acquired by Robert R. Reid. He made a start at designing the book, set several pages, and printed a prospectus before turning over the book to his former student, Hugh Michaelson, with encouragement to complete it. Michaelson was a book designer and gladly accepted the task. When I spoke to Michaelson recently at the opening of the Cattell exhibition, he told me that Reid gave him complete freedom to do as he wished. He felt that the design proposed by Reid was on too small a scale. The result was a more monumental size of 34.0 by 22.8 cm.

The original design did not include illustrations. Michaelson felt that illustrations were needed to break the flow of the text. It was Michaelson who approached Cattell to do the illustrations and cover. Michaelson expected that Cattell would put forward a single design for the covers. As Cattell explained it, as he was reading



through the play he saw so many images coming forward that he suggested doing one hundred paintings for the covers. It was, in his words, “an opportunity to try to visually resolve the story’s abstract location and its inhabitants 100 times.” The covers took Cattell two years to complete.

Another element that sets this book apart is that it is a play. Except for Shakespeare’s plays, private presses are not known to take on designing and printing drama. The only play by a Canadian private press that I am aware of is the Barbarian Press edition of the Bard’s *Play of Pericles*.

A book designer by profession dealing with trade books, Michaelson was a private press printer only on a small scale. This is the only substantial book that Michaelson actually printed himself. However, the design and execution of the printing of this book makes one wish that Michaelson had done more.

When discussing this book in *Reid’s Leaves* (Heavenly Monkey, 2001), Robert R. Reid described it as a “monumental” edition and “one of the major fine limited editions ever printed in Canada.” It was also the book that exorcised Reid’s “demon of regret” for not



bringing George Woodcock’s play into being himself as a finely printed limited edition.

I agree with Reid’s assessment, and his statement holds true today.

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 ~ Chester Gryski is lawyer practising in Toronto and a contributing editor of *Amphora*. This is the first in a regular series of columns focusing on private presses in Canada.