

*W.A. Dwiggins: A Life in Design*

BY BRUCE KENNETT

(LETTERFORM ARCHIVE, 2017, US\$95)

THOSE UNFAMILIAR WITH the work of William Addison Dwiggins (1880–1956) will come face to face with it in the lavish new volume from New Hampshire book designer Bruce Kennett. This isn't just because the book's design places Dwiggins's impish mug on the upper board and his self-representation as a marionette (Dwiggins was a man of many talents) on the lower. Rather, the 496 pages of this book serve as a comprehensive showcase of Dwiggins's work from childhood onwards.

The book reflects the mandate of the Letterform Archive, which collector Rob Saunders opened in San Francisco in 2015. The archive includes more than 40,000 items related to lettering, typography, calligraphy and graphic design, spanning 2,000 years of history. Supported by a crowdfunding program that raised more than US\$205,000, Kennett's book kicks off the archive's publishing program (there's no word at this point on future titles).

The result is an outpouring of Kennett's appreciation of Dwiggins and a desire to kindle that appreciation in others.

"What I want most to give you is a loving and extended view of this life so very well lived," Kennett says in the introduction. "Dwiggins is a treasure we all hold in common, and it is time that he became more fully appreciated."

The visual element is key. Indeed, the teaser on the Letterform Archive site describes the book as "a comprehensive visual biography." It features 1,200 high-resolution illustrations, many shot under raking light and presented at scale. The impact is tipped in the foreword by New York art director and writer Steven Heller, who gushes: "I couldn't hold myself back from exclaiming, 'Wow, I never saw that,' after I turned every page." For Heller, the book is "the next best thing to being in Dwiggins's presence."

To accomplish this feat, Kennett divides

the book into 11 chapters, each one focusing on a location where Dwiggins lived and worked. An additional three chapters, or sections, are unnumbered and focus on Dwiggins's work as a type designer, maker of marionettes and writer. The apparatus supporting the text includes a section of sources and notes, a select bibliography and suggested reading list, acknowledgements and subscribers, and an index.

(The list of subscribers makes interesting reading in itself. Several names will be familiar to Alcuin Society members, including Andrew Steeves, Paul Shaw and Chester Gryski, while McGill University Library, Michael Winship and Edward Tufte reflect the project's broad appeal and backing.)

The writing is clear, with some sparkling insights into both Dwiggins's career and his context, and most of the chapters are of a length that gives the reader the information needed to focus on the images. The longest chapters also reflect the key periods of Dwiggins's career, when his creative talents were most in demand and he was at his most productive. The longest by far is the 60-page chapter 8, which covers Dwiggins's work from 1922 to 1929 and the start of his association with publisher Alfred A. Knopf. The chapters up to this point form a long apprenticeship for the reader, but a useful one as Kennett shows how Dwiggins's initial sketches and illustrations and hand-lettering led to increasing commissions in areas ranging from advertising to book jackets as well as a rich imaginative life expressed through his alter ego Hermann Püterschein and the creation of hand-crafted marionettes.

However, the steady stream of accomplishments and illustrations risks being overwhelming. One wonders how Dwiggins got away with it all without being remembered by more people. The presentation of so much material in a biographical framework prevents a deep critical analysis of how it all fit together, and how Dwiggins managed to fall into the shadows of contemporaries (and friends) such as Frederic Goudy and D.B. Updike despite his prolific output.

We hear of a pacifism linked to his father's Quaker affiliation, but nothing of the spirit informing Dwiggins's work on a hand-lettered edition for his mother of Edwin Markham's *Christ*

with *Us* (1905) or the initials he contributed to *The Book of Common Prayer* (1930), considered the crowning achievement of Merrymount Press and Dwiggin's friend D.B. Updike, a devout Episcopalian. This may not matter, of course; it's the work that defines the artist, not every working of the imagination. (We know from the likes of Eric Gill that that can take us to some dark places.) And yet Kennett weaves together enough details from the many facets of Dwiggin's life that the reader wonders if some deeper dives might not have been possible.

Where we do get a measure of depth is in the catalogue of mentors, friends, family and colleagues who supported Dwiggin. The first full-page photo in the book (one prefaces each chapter) shows Dwiggin posing as a teenager in Cambridge, Ohio, with members of "the Pretty Tough Gang," with whom he would explore the local countryside. One of the members became Dwiggin's wife, and the group remained in touch through six decades. The length of connection offered a deep stability that informed Dwiggin's engagement in and with the culture of a confident, forward-moving country. The balance he achieved in a time of tumultuous change appears in historian John Kristensen's succinct evaluation: "Dwiggin was that remarkable thing, a modernist who knew and valued the past."

America's industrial expansion created opportunities for Dwiggin to exercise his gifts, more easily one feels than latter-day graphic artists eking out a living in the so-called gig economy. This isn't to say Dwiggin didn't face tough times; he scrambled for payments like the rest of us during economic recessions and would forage for Irish moss to make puddings that stretched the household budget a little further. However, Kennett presents a life lived to the full, one overflowing with more work than could be realized. This book gives a sense of what made it possible and presents a gallery to inspire others with the multifaceted output of a remarkable man.

~ REVIEWED BY PETER MITHAM

*Peter Mitham is editor of Amphora. A version of this review previously appeared in Book Arts/ Arts du livre Canada 9, no. 1 (Spring 2018).*



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