

REID'S LEAVES



A bibliography of the books from the private press of Robert R. Reid, published in Vancouver from 1949 to 1962. With commentaries by him and sample sheets from three of his books. Preface by Takao Tanabe.

HEAVENLY MONKEY
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ROBERT REID

& THE CANADIAN PRIVATE PRESS TRADITION

Rollin Milroy

The following is adapted from a talk given by Rollin Milroy last November, in Vancouver. Milroy's press, Heavenly Monkey, had just completed printing an annotated bibliography of the limited edition books Robert R. Reid published from 1949 to 1962. Reid collaborated on the project, writing commentaries and an extended afterword of his later work in Montreal and New York. Each copy features original sheets from three of Reid's books (Gold, The Journal of Norman Lee and Kuthan's Menagerie). The bibliography was hand set in Perpetua and printed on a Washington handpress. The edition is limited to 40 copies.



IN PREPARATION for a talk about Robert R. Reid's books, I researched the claim he's made, never entirely seriously, to be Canada's first private press printer, in the fine printing tradition. I discovered few reference books on fine printing in Canada – surprising when you consider how much has been written on the subject in the United States and England. In the few reference works we have, recorded history seems to begin in the late 1960s, with all that came before relegated to myth. For example, there seems to be a general ignorance of Reid. The chapter on Canada in the second edition of Roderick Cave's *Private Presses* offers an especially unique take on the players and events. The catalogue for an exhibit on fine printing in Canada organized in the mid-nineties by the Canadian Bookbinders & Book Artists Guild, is even farther off the mark: it lists only two of Reid's books, falsely attributes the creation of McGill's Redpath Press to others, and fails to mention the book which spurred that press's creation, the *Lande Bibliography of Canadiana*.

Between 1949 and 1962, Robert Reid published five limited edition, letterpress books in Vancouver: *The Fraser Mines Vindicated* (1949), *Gold* (1958), *The Journal of Norman Lee* (1959), *Kuthan's Menagerie* (1960), and *Grave Sires*: (1962). Each of these books reflects Robert's appreciation that there are a number of elements which must be combined to make something that can truly be considered a fine press book.

The Vancouver Books

Reid got his first printing press at the age of 10, a Christmas present from

the Hudson's Bay Co. By the time he was 18, studying commerce at the University of British Columbia, he'd been doing job printing on a small treadle press for several years. In the bibliography he describes the moment in 1948 when he was inspired to attempt printing a book:

"During my second year at university I was walking up the steps to the reading room of the UBC library when I glanced down at a display case under the opposite stairs. I stopped in midstep. There was a large white page with black type on it and a beautiful red initial. It was stunning. I went back down for a closer look, and almost immediately said to myself 'I want to print a book.'"

At the suggestion of the UBC librarian Kaye Lamb, Robert chose to reprint the first book published in BC, Alfred Waddington's *Fraser Mines Vindicated*. He had to copy the text out on a typewriter from the library's copy, then he spent two summers setting and printing the book. Robert's choice for his first book was a wise one. The Gold Rush and Northwest angles made it very popular with US collectors, and most of the 110 copies went down to California.

I first saw a copy of *Fraser Mines* just around the time I was beginning to learn about letterpress printing. I'd come to it as a book collector who wanted to develop a better eye for technique and craftsmanship. Don Stewart of McLeod's Books showed me a copy of *Fraser Mines*, and I couldn't believe it was the guy's first book. The printing and setting were immaculate, they were as good as you could aspire to.

But the really interesting thing about the book – and it reflects a central aspect of Robert's character – is that Robert's success didn't dishearten me at all. Sometimes when you see someone else take to something with what appears to be such natural ability, you wonder if you should bother wasting the time and paper to learn. But *Fraser Mines* had exactly the opposite effect on me. It made me want to try my hand at printing that much more. Robert has an infectious exuberance that just inspires you. It's probably what made him such a good teacher at the Art School in the sixties.

The success of *Fraser Mines* convinced Robert to make printing his career, which explains why it was almost a decade before he had the luxury of time to undertake another book. In 1958 he published a second BC historical reprint, *Gold*. This book is significant for a number of reasons, perhaps

the most important being the addition of Takao Tanabe's name to the imprint. Tak was introduced to printing by Robert, and apprenticed at his shop in the fifties. For *Gold* he committed to learn how to bind books, along with Robert's wife Felicity, and they did a significant portion of the edition in quarter leather and marbled paper. Serious collectors should note that some copies were bound by Fritz Brunn in Victoria. You can identify these because they have vellum tips and a register ribbon.

Gold marked the beginning of a burst of creative production. It was followed in 1959 by the *Lee Journal*, which continued the historical reprint vein but was actually an original publication. It was the diary of Norman Lee's cattle drive up the Telegraph Trail in the late 1800s. The *Lee Journal* may be the most significant of Robert's books from a publishing perspective. It's an original text that provides valuable insight to life in this part of the world at that time. The book, which was reprinted in a trade edition, has become an established historical reference. And as a fine press book, it's gorgeous. It's beautifully printed in two colours on handmade paper in an esoteric face. It has a couple of facsimile letters tipped in. And the binding was classic – Fritz Brunn was an old school binder with an eye for detail and quality.

Kuthan's Menagerie is the best known of Robert's books, probably for its visual virtuosity. Contrary to Cave in *Private Presses*, Kuthan wasn't the driving force behind this book. It was very much a Robert Reid publication. He had been using illustrations by George Kuthan since the early fifties. When Kuthan showed Robert some large linocuts he'd been doing of animals from the Vancouver Zoo, it was Robert's idea to develop them into a book.

Many of the illustrations were multiple block images, and Ib Kristensen did a fine job of printing them. Ib, a professional pressman who wanted to do something more interesting than commercial printing, worked on the book during his free time. The text was set by Gus Rueter, whose son Will established the well-known Aliquando Press in Toronto in the seventies. Once again Fritz Brunn did a beautiful quarter leather binding.

Robert's last project in Vancouver – *Grave Sires*: – was very different from the books that had preceded it. It was poetry. It's a more modern, elongated format. It was bound in wraps. And it used an austere, modern typographic style, probably a result of Tak Tanabe's influence (he hadn't really been

involved with the Lee or Kuthan projects, but he was with *Grave Sirs*:).

Collectors should note two states of this book exist: the original with letterpress wraps, and a facsimile printed offset on different paper. All of the 300 copies were sewn up, but only an initial batch was pasted into the printed wraps. These wraps were printed letterpress by Robert at the Art School. It seems the distribution for the book was pretty limited and local, so the unbound copies were never called for. Robert wasn't aware that two states of the book existed when we started the bibliography, so it was a mystery we had to puzzle out.

Robert had left Vancouver shortly after the book was published. He had a grant to spend a year traveling around Europe visiting type foundries and designers and papermakers. When the year was up he went to Montreal, to design books for the McGill Press. Some boxes of the unbound *Newloves* moved with his stuff to Montreal and sat in a closet for a few years. Then he met a young guy named Bill Hoffer, who was heading to Vancouver to start a bookshop. Bob gave him the unbound *Newloves*. Connecting the dots, we deduced that Hoffer had printed up facsimile wraps for the unbound sheets so he could actually sell the books.

McGill & The Redpath Press

Grave Sirs: was the last of Robert's limited editions printed in Vancouver. When his year abroad ended, he went to Montreal, to take on design of all the books published by McGill. His arrival, and his love for fine book-making, marked the beginning of a period during which McGill published some significant and beautiful books. And I think it was at McGill that the single most important work of Robert's career, and of fine printing in Canada, took place: *The Lande Bibliography of Canadiana*.

There are a couple of stories to tell about this book. The first is a funny one that reflects how people can get swept up by Robert's enthusiasm for books. Lawrence Lande was a wealthy Montreal businessman who amassed a major collection of *Canadiana*, which he gave to McGill in the early sixties. One of the stipulations of this gift was that the university produce a bibliography of the collection.

This was one of the projects Robert was given when he arrived at the university. He assumed Lande was footing the bill, and every time they met during the planning Robert would have new ideas for how to make the book really luxurious, using papers and types and leathers he'd seen during his travels around Europe. Lande kept saying *Great idea, do it!* But unbeknownst to Robert, Lande wasn't paying – McGill was. So when the bills for all the materials started coming in there was shock all around at McGill. But I suspect everyone agreed the final product was worth the effort and expense.

The second story has to do with setting the record straight on how and why McGill's Redpath Press was created. As Robert's plans for the Lande book grew increasingly grand, he realized there was no press in Canada capable of printing what he had in mind. So he convinced the head librarian at McGill, Richard Pennington, that they should set up their own print shop to undertake the work. They bought a press from the *Toronto Star*, and Robert got Ib Kristensen to move from Vancouver to be his pressman. That's how the Redpath Press was born – essentially it was Robert's second imprint.

It's interesting that neither the Cave nor the CBBAG books even mention the Lande bibliography, much less Robert's central role in the project or the connection between the book and the creation of Redpath Press.

Salmon

Robert left McGill in 1972 to start a phototypesetting business. In 1974 there was an international Law of the Sea conference. One of the issues it was to address was high seas salmon fishing. Canada had a strong interest in this, because it affected the number of salmon that made it back here to spawn.

Through a friend, Robert became involved in developing something that would put Canada's case forward to the various delegations. It's similar to the Lande story: the civil servants started out thinking of a little brochure, and Robert ended up making them a huge limited edition portfolio that contained a book by Roderick Haig-Brown, published in three different languages, and prints by a number of artists including Bill Reid, all contained in a clamshell box with a Reid relief carving on the cover and sides made from old oak church pews. Robert actually had to set up a bindery in

Old Montreal to build the 2000 boxes needed for the edition, because there was no commercial firm that could meet the order.

By the time it was finished, the project's budget totalled a half million dollars, which is like spending two million now. And it worked. These things were distributed to all the delegates and Canada's position won out at the conference, and the civil servant who'd worked with Robert on the project was named "Civil Servant of the Year" with a cash grant to boot.

At the Sign of the Gryphon

Later in 1974 Robert moved to New York, where his time was devoted to book packaging with major publishers. He continued to maintain a print shop, and published some broadsides by poets including Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg, and ephemera under the imprint *At the Sign of the Gryphon*. One of the last things Robert printed was a prospectus for a book he'd wanted to publish for many years. It was a radio drama by George Woodcock, with whom Robert had worked on some literary journals during the early sixties. Robert got the type all set on his Linotypes, but never got around to actually printing the book. When he dismantled his shop, much of the equipment went to a former student of his from the Vancouver Art School, Hugh Michaelson, who was living outside of Toronto. Hugh took all the stuff, including the galleys, home and proceeded to print the book *The Island of Demons* in an edition of 100 copies, each using an original painting by the artist Ray Cattell for the binding. It won an Alcuin design award in 1999.

Reid's Leaves

I was a little trepidatious about approaching Robert with the idea of printing a bibliography. He didn't know me, and I was asking to print a book about his work. That's pretty audacious for someone who really doesn't have any reputation. And I wondered if he'd want to take over the project, dictating things like design and content. I may be a beginner, but I still have opinions about the books I'm going to publish.

As it turns out I was worrying over nothing, and in fact I quickly came to rely on Robert for all kinds of advice. And this is where I started to see why

students would have responded so well to him. His whole manner is encouraging; even if what you're doing is awful he'll be enthusiastic about the fact that you're interested and trying.

The manuscript came together pretty quickly. The only problem was, every time we got together to discuss it, he'd tell me some other story that was too good to leave out, so I kept asking him for more content and the book kept getting bigger.

In designing the book I took a very simple, conservative approach. I felt Robert's work should really stand out, and I didn't want my design competing with it (mainly because I knew I'd lose). But I share, and tried to reflect, Robert's fundamental philosophy of book design, which can be discerned by looking at any of his books: the printing and typography are just the beginning. All of the materials used need to be the equal of the others. Robert loves paper, especially handmade paper. He knows what's required for a binding that is appropriate for the project. He didn't cut corners on materials. He didn't limit his projects to what he could bankroll, but figured out ways to get the best materials – and people – appropriate for the book.

By the time Reid undertook his second book in 1958, there were a number of people back in Toronto – including Carl Dair, Gus Rueter and Bill Poole – with similar ambitions. But publishing *Fraser Mines* in 1949 is what I believe gives legitimacy to a claim that Robert is Canada's first private press printer (as much as being first matters). Kemp Waldie's Golden Dog Press, active in the 1930s, is often cited as the first private press in Canada. I've never seen any of his work, but a catalogue description of one book in a "metal coil binding" makes me suspect we're talking about something very different from what Robert did.

I think when you look at this, and consider the scope of his subsequent work, you can see he's made some remarkable contributions to the Canadian fine press tradition. But as his collaborator from that period, Takao Tanabe, wrote in the bibliography's preface, "I have to believe the five early books he did in Vancouver were the most fun to design and make."

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