

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ralph Stanton*

daughter, generously waived copyright on this use to aid the fund raising activities of the Friends of the St. Bride Printing Library.

There are two essays in the book. Caroline Archer has introduced the book with an account of the work done by Ravilious for Kynoch Press, who were one of the few printing firms in England considered responsible for innovative work in the 1920s and 1930s. She also begins a reappraisal of Ravilious' letterforms, engraved for Kynoch and other clients. The second essay is a reprint, specially edited for this celebratory book, of Robert Harling's introduction to *The Engravings of Eric Ravilious*, published by the Shenval Press in 1946 and quickly reprinted. This was the first critical appreciation of Ravilious' engraved work. We do not think it has been surpassed by any subsequent writing, and so are particularly pleased that the author has allowed us to include it here.

The "A" edition is issued without limitation, printed on acid-free paper in Bembo types. They are machine trimmed and bound, in full cloth over boards. Copies cost 48 pounds, and can be ordered from Barry McKay Rare Books, Kingstone House, Battlebarrow, Appleby-in-Westmoreland, Cumbria, CA16 6XT. The "B" edition is of 200 copies, numbered and signed by Caroline Archer. They are bound by hand with cloth spines and Ravilious patterned paper over boards, finished size about 9 x 6 inches. In a pocket at the back are proof pulls of the four engravings from the book. Copies are 75 pounds each including post. Cheques made payable to Incline Press should be sent with your order to 11a Printer Street, Oldham, England, OL1 1PN.

*Five Hundred Years of Book Design*. Alan Bartram. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. \$35.00 U.S.

In his new book, Alan Bartram wants to determine how early printed books stand up to today's modern standards of design. This is a different approach than similar books such as: Stanley Morison's *Four Centuries of Fine Printing*, 1924, Stanley Morison and Kenneth Day's *The Typographic Book 1450-1935*, 1963, Joseph Blumenthal's *Art of the Printed Book 1455-1955*, 1973, and Kelly Hutner's *A Century of the Century*, 1999. What these titles have in common is the display of sample pages from early printed books to illustrate the author's points.

Unlike the earlier books whose authors wanted to celebrate and learn from past masters, Bartram is primarily concerned with applying modern conventions and practices of book design to five and a half centuries of printed book production. Thereby he wants to discover how adequate older books are in terms of modern standards and ways. In the process the early "designers" are often found wanting or roundly criticized. Another point of difference is Bartram's preference for text pages rather than title-pages which are the preferred subjects of his predecessors.

Bartram states in his preface "...my main purpose is to look at classic books afresh, through the eyes of a twentieth/ twenty-first century designer." This he does, but he also says, "Of course, all artefacts should be judged on their own terms, bearing in mind the times and conditions in which they were created." This he fails to do in any adequate sense.

His text suggests to me that he does not fully appreciate how much the early printers derived their practices from the manuscript books that preceded typographic books. What emerges from his text is how disciplined and regimented modern design is, and how flexible, experimental and even crazy some of the early designs appear to modern eyes.

Some of his objections to past conventions seem trivial especially his repeated distress at seeing a full stop used after a heading. He also objects to such practices as the reuse of decorative elements from previous generations, and the cutting down of old initial letters to be reused. These protests show how modern designers take for granted the vast repertoire of computer generated “typography”, and how little we understand the limitations imposed by the lack of resources that were the lot of previous generations.

In the end what I found most problematic was Bartram’s inability to extract himself from his own time and enter the world of his predecessors on their terms. If you compare say, the leather bookbindings of the 16th century Italians to those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French, you would have to conclude that the perfectionist French masters are far more skilled than their Italian predecessors. But how much warmer, more charming and fun the Italian bindings are! It is precisely the variation, or if you like the imperfection, of the Italians that makes their bindings a real delight. Old books often intrigue us because they have not achieved the ruthless regularity and formulaic nature of modern industrial book production even though they are mass-produced objects.

What about the design of this book,

is it up to the rigorous standards set by Mr. Bartram’s text? The dust jacket and format are eye catching. It’s a tall quarto with a cover image of the octavo 1501 Aldine Virgil: *Opera* with a light floral decoration in manuscript purple ink setting off Bembo’s italic type. The text in Monotype Fournier is set in a small point size that might have shocked Pierre-Simon Fournier. A few of the page reproductions are presented full size but more often they are reduced, sometimes down to 39 percent actual size, the sometimes disturbing result of placing the text and illustration on one page. The paper stock is disconcertingly white and the illustrations drab in their greyness. Compare this book to *The Typographic Book 1450-1935* and you will see how far down the slippery slope to visual banality the cost cutters have lead us.

Despite my complaints about this book I did find it very stimulating, a sometimes fresh and sometimes naive look at some old typographic friends. Those who have some or all of the other books mentioned in this review will want this book in their collection. Others may want to borrow it from their public library.



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*Ralph Stanton is a member of the Alcuin Society Board and of the Publications Committee. He is Rare Books and Special Collections Librarian at the University of British Columbia.*