

BARBARIAN PRESS

Kuldip Gill

IN THIS ISSUE OF *AMPHORA*, devoted in part to the Mission District Arts Council, I couldn't find a quote more appropriate to begin an article on Barbarian Press than these lines from their own website's Press News, 2003:

Is it really so naïve to point out that a society, a culture, which pays no heed to its artists, is a society shut off from its own thoughts? There is no tragedy like that of the unexamined life.

Barbarian Press in Mission, B.C. is well worth an in-depth examination as part of our rich life in this part of the Fraser Valley. I interviewed Jan and Crispin Elsted, the proprietors of the press, at their home in October. Both were in the middle of a bout of colds and of presswork that had strict deadlines. Nevertheless, we spent close to two hours talking about Barbarian Press. During the interview I stayed close to the format of other articles we have been writing in *Amphora* on small presses of B.C., since that has best allowed me to give the reader the most information in a concise way, even though the cost could well be the loss of the occasional anecdote or more personal observation. On the latter, for this article, I emphasized that I was seeking their more personal comments on their thoughts, and the philosophy and processes used at the press, since their website Barbarianpress.com already offers the reader who seeks it a bounty of other information.

Barbarian Press, printers and publishers of fine press books and limited editions, with Crispin and Jan Elsted as proprietors, was established in Kent, England in 1977, and is now situated on Ainsworth Road, in the softly rolling hillside of a rural part of Mission City, B.C. The Press began with three flatbed hand presses — an 1850 super royal Hopkinson & Cope Albion, an 1833 foolscap folio Barrett bench Albion, and an 1854 foolscap folio Sherwin & Cope Imperial. Since moving shop to Mission, they have added Vandercook Universal I and Universal III proofing presses, two Chandler & Price vertical platen presses, much more type, and a small hand bindery. In total, they have ten presses on site, as well as much type, and a small hand bindery.

While the press is noted for a range of publications, from new translations of poetry and prose, Victorian melodrama, and new poetry, to bibliography and illustrated classics, of late they are famous for books on wood engraving. Since the publication in 1995 of *Endgrain: Contemporary Wood Engraving in North America*, greeted and acclaimed widely,

they now are in the process of producing an ongoing series of books called *Endgrain Editions*. Each shows work by a single engraver, printed from the original blocks, with an introduction and a catalogue of major works. The first of these, on Canadian engraver Gerard Brender à Brandis, appeared in 2000.

Jan, who is the pressman for Barbarian Press, began by telling me that their first book, written by Crispin in celebration of a friend's 50th wedding anniversary, was printed under the tutelage of Graham Williams in a small cottage in Kent. They were students in England at the time and wanted to print the book, not just type it up. Their introduction to Williams led to the discovery of how to set type, select papers and print on hand presses. From that early beginning they aspired to print only on hand presses. As Jan said, "that was the traditional way and it was more satisfying, but it became obvious that it just wasn't fast enough to make a living at it. It was fine if you wanted just to be a hobby printer and print only occasional things and could take a couple of years to do it, but once we decided we wanted to produce enough books to make a living then we had to alternate with other kinds of presses."

She went on to say that she no longer prints on hand presses for any length of time. "In 1984 we made a set of broadsheets — typographical broadsheets with all sorts of founts which were all on handmade papers and different type faces and printed on the Albion press — and we wanted to do that again, to work on display faces so that we had the experience of working together again, so that I would work and Crispin would help me, and we could work in a more contemplative way than we had for a few years. So every once in a while we have a new project just on the hand press, to revisit why we started and where we have come from. But I still enjoy printing wood engravings on any of the other presses too. I've specialized in it. I'm working on a book now about printing wood engravings."

ENGRAVINGS

A bibliography of the work produced at the press shows a number of different threads to their interests. I wondered how they select what to print, or if the ideas for books are submitted to them. In 1984, the first book they did which they intended to have illustrated with engravings was *A Christmas Carol*. Crispin said that they had to find an engraver for it, so they wrote to John and Rose Randle at Whittington Press and asked



if they knew of any wood engravers. The Randles suggested four or five, one of whom was Edwina Ellis, who proved to be the right match even though she had never illustrated a book. She was known internationally for her prints, and she was just getting started at that time. Crispin said, “She had a typically zany Australian sense of humour and we have kept the correspondence between Edwina and ourselves about the book: it really should be published. It’s quite hilarious. She tells of hiring an ex-marine next door for the ghost of Christmas past — how he was talked into putting on a frock to model for her.” Jan and Crispin at first chose their engravers by simply looking at published books with other engravings, such as those of the Grolier Society or other private presses. Then they contacted the engravers and asked if they would be interested in illustrating a book. Now they have a wide acquaintance among engravers and most of their books are illustrated by people they know.

I asked what captures their attention about a particular wood engraving. Jan said that they “choose an illustrator for a particular text — someone who has a relationship to the text and to the kinds of work that we do. But we also do a series on individual artists that we call *Endgrain Editions*. It started with a book called *Endgrain: Contemporary Wood Engraving in North America*, which was a survey of 121 engravers in North America. We discovered far more of them than we ever imagined. That introduced us to a whole range of artists and after that we decided we’d like to do books on individual artists. We selected things we liked



and approached people and selected from that list. What do we look for? Illustrative literacy! Someone who reads and can illustrate a text!”

Illustrating a text requires special kinds of skill, intuition, and imagination, according to Crispin. “An extraordinary number of illustrators don’t seem to read books — they don’t understand what’s going on in a text at all. So we look for an engraver who is technically splendid and who can *read* a text — read between the lines and pull the connotations from the text. You need a literary intuition, which a lot of engravers don’t have, because if you have just come straight through graphic art school then your whole vocabulary is graphic and you don’t know a thing about text. Engravers like that are hard to find. There is a handful — Barry Moser and Simon Brett, obviously, Andy English — these are people we have worked with because they are literate as well as technically excellent.”

According to Jan, when it comes to the choice of an individual artist to do a book, “we look for someone who has range — not just a one note artist — because wood engraving can be a limited medium. It’s like someone who writes sonnets: if they can expand from that form somehow, they can move the parameters of it and do a range of things with it. We choose someone who can do engravings that can stand on their own and not merely as illustration. The first artist we did was Gerard Brender à Brandis, who basically does botanical engravings. That is a very compatible subject for the medium, but he doesn’t flog that, and he does the engravings extremely well. The second artist was Abigail Rorer, an American artist who isn’t all that well known, but she had a wood engraving in *Endgrain* (the first *Endgrain*) that was one of our favourites in the entire book. It had wit, technique and a sense of narrative in it, characterization — there was something that really jumped out of the page, so we asked to see more of her work and the same qualities came out. She also excels in figures, portraits, which is not common among engravers. Many of them shy away from figures.”

The discussion on illustration and its choices went on in an impassioned way. Crispin talked about the catch phrase “hedge row style” in England, that referred to landscape engraving or pastoral scenes. “They are lovely, and I must say that when you get down to it, they are as enjoyable as anything else, but our affection for them is largely founded on our

being used to seeing wood engraving as illustration. Because we are interested in illustrations for text, we have been more drawn to people who do narrative engraving. But there are wood engravers who are doing work that is quite abstract and that pushes the envelope. For instance, the work of Peter Lazarov and Richard Wagener comes to mind. Peter Lazarov was trained in Bulgaria and his training at art school was the same kind that people would have found in the 19th century in North America and Europe — anatomy, life drawing, and figure drawing. His work with figures and faces is therefore beautiful, just wonderful, though oddly enough he has done very little in the illustration of texts. He does prints. Large scale prints.”



As he reflected, Elsted said, “another thing that would be interesting would be to try to match those engravers who may not be interested in doing narrative engraving with a text that might in some way evoke what they already touch in their engraving. So Peter Lazarov, who doesn’t do illustration per se, is nevertheless the one I chose to do a frontispiece for a book of some of my poems (*A Natural History of Surprise*). The engraving he did for the frontispiece doesn’t actually illustrate any of the poems, but it somehow evokes qualities: I asked Peter to read them, and he’s particularly sensitive to language and managed to find images which he invoked and he set the points quite nicely.”

Many of the artists mentioned by Crispin and Jan Elsted are represented in *Endgrain* and can be consulted there.

THE INKS

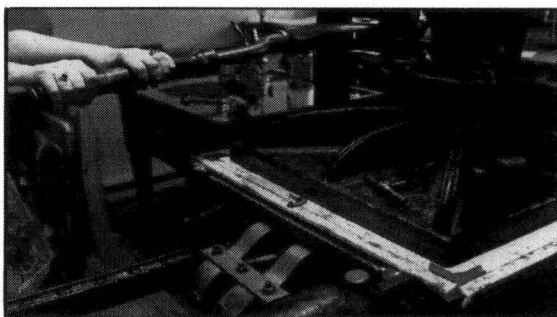
Jan Elsted is fascinated with the inks used in the printing process. “Inks, however, are a very frustrating thing too — they’re becoming more and more difficult to find. I used to be able to get nice inks in Vancouver. There was someone who was making letterpress ink at one time. Now, some people who make offset inks will say they make letterpress ink, but they don’t.” From my talks with press owners in the past, I know that inks and a knowledge of them is crucial to fine printing, but I didn’t know the difference between offset ink and letterpress inks. “I don’t know the chemistry of it,” said Jan, “but a letterpress ink has to be much stiffer than offset inks, which are runny. They use only a thin layer of it — a couple of times I’ve had them give me an ink as letterpress ink that is straight offset ink and it just looks black, whatever colour it is, green or

blue, it will still look black, because they use it differently. It's the way it works with the presses and how it is applied." Crispin went on to explain further the way inks work. "The physics of ink is simply that if you have a flat surface like the surface of a letter (which is also often quite small) and you apply ink to it, and the ink is pressed down into the surface of the paper, then if the ink is proper letterpress ink — that is, stiff ink — it remains on the type surface and leaves a crisp impression on the page. Offset ink, because it is sloppy, wells up around the sides of the type when you press it onto the paper, and you get a heavy inking around the edges and a colourless mess in the middle. You can see this if you look at a letter under strong magnification, but the effect of the page is that it is slurred and grey. Both inks print well on the presses suited to them, but the black ink in the letterpress book is darker, whereas the offset ink tends to grey. There is a density in letterpress books, a richness, a 3-D quality, whereas offset ink just sits on the surface. Because the ink is pushed into the surface in letterpress printing, the paper has more texture. Since you are using more actual ink you do get an almost 3-D quality."

The topic of inks generates some *angst* for most press operators. Like timbre in a voice, the questions around the type of ink generate a lot of problems and solutions that must be addressed to produce the expected and desired qualities. Many people order inks from preferred international sources. Jan Elsted orders some from Vancouver, but only colours. "I order inks from a couple of sources in the States — from a couple of different places. Boxcar Press had a supply of inks made by Midway Inks that were very good letterpress inks — nice and stiff. They had a good black and a good red, with the qualities I like: they stayed open long enough and dried well. Unfortunately, they're no longer available. There's also an ink made by Hoffman-Steinberg that's only sold by NA Graphics in Colorado, and Hoffman-Steinberg makes a special black letterpress ink designed by Stephen Heaver of the Hill Press in Baltimore. When it comes to colours you have to use an offset ink, and add a drier. Sometimes I have to add cornstarch to ink to make it stiffer, less runny. That gives a nice matte finish rather than a shiny one and is especially good for wood engravings, though not so much for type."

During my visit, Crispin showed me the things we were talking about, using their actual printed texts. He showed me a wood engraving by Peter Lazarov and pointed out the fine lines that came up, saying, "and

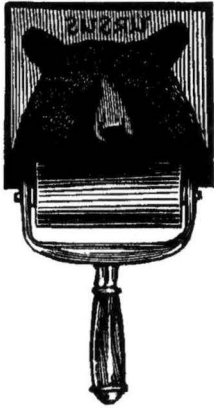
that's because the ink is stiff enough." Jan showed me the differences in the engravings that are linked to inks — shades of greyness or of density or lack thereof, linked to the use of offset inks. Abigail Rorer has devised a way of using Corian, a kitchen-counter material, for engraving. It has some very desirable attributes: it is very affordable, very smooth and level. She finds that it cuts nicely and although not all engravers like the material, she does. It is also more readily available than boxwood.



Another engraver, one in California, is using a material of his own invention called Resingrave, a composite of polymer resins. Jan says, "I don't like either as much as boxwood when it comes to printing. Wood is still a living substance and has a different kind of responsiveness. Maybe that sounds romantic, but I don't think it is. I find when I'm doing make-ready, which is a process of building up layers to get an even impression, that an engraving on wood responds better, especially if there's a weak surface. However, I have to admit that wood can deteriorate if it isn't carefully handled." When printing wood engravings, Jan says "I don't seem to get as tired, although when I did 500 for *Endgrain* that was awful. I like to do about 250, then I can keep my attention all the way through the run — be as exacting as possible. Printing text is not as satisfying. I still have to get it looking right but it isn't as satisfying as seeing an image come off the page."

I asked Crispin how he feels about that. Is type more interesting than illustration? He replied, "Oh, I adore type! I love type! When I look at the text of something we are going to publish it rarely takes me more than a few moments to decide what typeface we'll use. In fact, often when I'm reading poetry or a novel I find myself thinking about how I would design it if we were to print it." He goes on to say that it's a personal response to a combination of text and quality of the text — if there's a certain quality, a mood or personality or quality of thought to the text that suggests itself, then often the typeface choice will go to that.

"We did an edition of Spenser's *Prothalamion and Epithalamion* a few years ago. That was written in the early to mid-16th century and the typefaces available today that might historically have gone with that were Poliphilus and Blado or Bembo, all of which were based on faces that



Aldus Manutius used in Venice at the end of the 15th century, so they were in the air — although the typefaces used in England at the time were diabolical for good typography and remained so until Caslon in the 18th century. But I chose to use Cancelleresca Bastarda, which is a 20th century redrawing of a Chancery bastard script, based on a secretarial or Chancery hand from the early to late 17th century in Holland. It has no connection historically or geographically with Spenser's poems, but it does have tremendous grace and a beautiful sensual flow visually. It's very easy to read, quite open at the counters."

The choice of typeface, Crispin said, was "personal, and has to do with the flow of the text and the flow of the typeface. It also has to do with the pragmatic elements of how a page is read. If you're doing a book like this one" — he opened a page of their bibliography, *Hoi Barbaroi* — "that is quite large and you have a page of text which is wide, you have to make some choices." He showed me some text: "Now this is 12 point Bembo, leaded 4 points, so by the time the eye gets to the end of the line it's not going to have any trouble finding its way down to the beginning of the next line; it won't read the same thing over and over again. If the lines were too close together it would be hard to get from the end of one line to the beginning of the next without jumping a line or coming back to the same line. These decisions have to be weighed. If you are setting a page this wide, you don't want to use a sans serif, for example, because serifs help to move the eye horizontally. Nor would you want to use a face that is terribly condensed, where the letters were very narrow, like Van Dijk italic or Spectrum, for instance. This book [*Inishbream*] is set in Joanna. This is a modern typeface designed by Eric Gill, who was an inscriptional letterer and a wood engraver. In Joanna, the counters [the open spaces in a letter] in the lower case "e", "o" and "a," as well as the "p," are very large, and the face is generously proportioned. Because its 'set' is very wide, there is lots of room for the eye to move as it reads the word. However, you have to be very careful with word spacing when you are using Joanna because if it is spaced too tightly the words tend to mush together; whereas Bembo, for example, you can set with as little as 2 points between words and it will still read perfectly well. Bembo is based on a 15th century Italian face designed by somebody whose interest was textual. All these things have to be considered."

Another consideration raised by Jan and by many other small press owners previously is that of the pragmatic decisions which must be made. “We can’t afford to buy type for every book, so Crispin has basically got a group of house faces that we hope will mostly satisfy the things we want.” Periodically however they do go and buy some new typefaces.

Among the types that satisfy Crispin are Bembo, Joanna, and Van Dijck, “...and Poliphilus – and there are still one or two I’d like to have.”

He uses Poliphilus “because, overall, it is my favourite typeface in the world. It’s also based on a face that was designed for Aldus in Venice and was revived by the Monotype Corporation just after the First World War and during the 1920s. They copied it from pages printed by Aldus, but they photographed the pages without realizing that the type had been slightly over-inked, so the finished type looks blacker than the same type in Aldus’s books generally does. Robert Bringhurst describes it beautifully: ‘(It is a) rough, somewhat ruffled yet charming face, like a Renaissance aristocrat, unshaven and in stockinged feet, caught between the bedroom and the bath.’” Crispin hands me a copy of *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, the poem by John Keats, with wood engravings by Andy English, set in Poliphilus and printed at Barbarian Press. We admire it. It is lovely.

I asked Crispin about colour, the visual ‘weight’ of the type on the page. “Joanna is quite strongly coloured, and for that reason it’s good to use for wood engravings, as is Garamond. Some types, like Centaur, don’t sit well with wood engravings unless the engravings are quite light and textured, because the type is delicate and the engravings tend to swamp it. But, provided the balance of type with wood engraving in the book is good, neither the type nor the block will lose out.”

“How do you decide what to publish, and are you open to submissions?” was the next question. Jan replied that they no longer accept commissions. “We used to do a certain amount of commission printing — it wasn’t our publishing and that helped us to get by, and the money was up-front! We did some poetry and we enjoyed the relationship, but it took far too long to produce a volume. It took months out of our year. Six months!” But such work meant that, even though the work was exacting, it made Barbarian Press just a jobbing printer.

The Elsteds decided that they would rather do their own books even though they’d have the marketing to worry about. “It’s pretty rare now that we accept a book when someone sends us a manuscript and asks us

about publication. We have had the odd manuscript come to us that way which we've published — a book of poetry by Rachel Norton and Paula Jones, *Believed to Cause Night* (1992), and another waiting to be done now, but generally they're solicited. The trouble with printing poetry is that it doesn't make very much money, although it's not something we want to give up doing. We have to fit it in where we can since we want to do it. We believe in doing it — but not because it's profitable for us," Jan mused.

Still, each press must have some method for selecting its manuscripts. "The spine that runs through our list," said Crispin Elsted, "is wood engraving: the *Endgrain Editions* series, books on wood engravings and on particular engravers, and related to that is the fact that most of the books we choose are texts that can and will be illustrated with wood engravings. Possibly because we're getting older, as we go along we are increasingly moving towards the classics. The book we are doing after this bibliography is Shakespeare's *Pericles*, for which I've done a new edition of the text, and Simon Brett, the English engraver, is illustrating it for us. It will be available sometime in 2005; it is going to be a slow process. Simon and I have been talking about this book for about three years now and Simon has given me some preliminary sketches. We're getting into it. We want to marry the text and illustrations much more closely than is usually the case. We don't want just to have an illustration on the verso and text on the recto; we want them to be intertwined to some degree."

"People always want to know how you work with artists", I asked. Crispin Elsted replied that engravers always send them sketches first, and he will often discuss the drawings with the engraver. But, he said, "Apart from with some illustrators, I'm not actually big on collaboration on the whole: book design for me is an autocratic process; I'm a bit of an autocrat. On the other hand, I see no point in simply ordering an illustration as one might a dinner. I work out layouts, the spaces available for illustrations, and usually suggest subjects within the text I think would illustrate well, but of course often the engraver will come up with other ideas, and they are usually better because they come from the artist's enthusiasm. With binders I'm much more specific, because I design the binding as part of the book. I like collaborating with Simon because I trust him and because I have such an admiration for his work and his

visual literacy. Simon is the only engraver to whom I'd give a text and say 'do what you want'. Simon and I are doing some interesting



things with *Pericles*. The play begins with a chorus, a prologue, and the prologue sets the scene, so rather than have the usual preliminaries of a book — where you have a half title page, a title page, sometimes a frontispiece, a dedication, and so forth — all of those things are there, but so is the text, because in fact we will start the words of the prologue on the front free endpaper of the book. It will start there, in large letters, and it will move along the bottom of the pages where all the other stuff is going on, rather cinematically — the way credits are often run across the beginnings of the action as it takes place. So by the time we arrive at the first page of the text, you will have gone through the initial few lines of the prologue and will already have moved right into the story.”

BOOK DESIGN

As we talked about the exterior of the book, Crispin said, “One of the things that’s interesting to me about designing a book is that one is no longer wedded to the proportion of a handmade sheet, as used to be the case when the proportions of octavo, quarto, etc. were dictated by the number of times the sheet was folded. Now of course the paper can be made in sheets the size of this table and you can cut or fold them anywhere you like. The only thing that does somewhat restrict one is the grain. Some designers do take full advantage of this freedom — Claire van Vliet, for instance, who does wonderful die-cut pages and so on — but those books are much more artist’s books, which is not something we do or are interested in. The kind of advantage we might take is designing books that are quite tall and narrow, for instance — a form I like very much for some reason.

“When designing a book of poetry, very often the general length of the line is going to be short enough that you don’t really want vast amounts of margin on each side of the poem itself. If you’re doing a book of verse where no given line is longer than, say, 10 ems or so, it would be possible with a large collection to put the poems in columns. Not that it’s likely anyone would do that except in an anthology, where economic and space restraints had to be considered — but it could certainly be done. In a fine

press book, unless one is for some reason using large type, the tendency is to do quite a small book where the poems will sit daintily on the page and not be swamped by the space around them. The book we published in 1985 by Jaan Kaplinski, *The Same Sea in Us All*, created problems for me: most of the poems had very short lines, but two of them mixed the short lines with lines that were immensely long. I decided on a Draconian approach, and lined all the poems hard left, leaving lots of room for the longer lines when they occurred, something I wish I had thought through more carefully. It would have been better to have placed each poem according to its needs. I hadn't the experience then to see it. If I were designing it now, I would do it quite differently.

“With *Pericles*, we've got a text which again is quite circumscribed in width because of the blank verse. On the other hand, there are also passages of prose, but those can be set up to a measure that balances nicely with the verse: they have to be sufficiently wider than the blank verse so that it is clear you are treating prose as something else. The stage directions, which are a third element, can mediate between the two, as well as offering the eye some variety because of being set in italic. But of course the other element in *Pericles* is the element of visual breaks, allowing space for the engravings, and I have to give Simon's work generous areas in the margins and at the head and foot of the page. That is especially the case with *Pericles* because the engravings will appear in a great variety of positions, and will vary considerably in size and shape. For that we will need a much more open page, as if the book's openings were in themselves a stage for acting.

“Another little book we're doing is with Nancy Ruth Jackson, an American engraver. It's coming out next year and is a sort of Christmas fable that she has written herself and 'decorated', as she puts it. We are doing that as a 'landscape' with double columns which is fun to do because it provides the illustrator with the opportunity to use the left hand column on the page for an enormous illuminated initial letter against the text in the right hand column. Nancy Ruth Jackson was featured in *Endgrain*. She got in touch with us two or three years ago and sent us the manuscript of the story with a note saying, 'Lots of people don't like it — what do you think?' We thought it was great.”

Jan Elsted, listening at his side, then spoke: “My understanding of what you do when you are designing a new text is that as you choose the

new text, the design begins to take shape. It's different from being a typographical designer for a publisher where you take the graphic designer's idea and work from that. It's a completely different approach when you select the text and illustration, paper and type and binding, all taking shape together with one another, all developing at the same time."

As I referred to their work as art books, Crispin and Jan explained that they don't like to use the word "art" in this context. They would even argue that illustration is a craft rather than an art. "I don't mean that these people aren't artists: they are. But the art is applied in a particular way and that application makes it a craft rather than an art." We also discussed 'artist's books'. Apparently the semantics are confusing. Crispin remarked that "a lot of the terminology has become a muddle. One is used to the earlier French term *livre d'artiste* — used in the earlier part of the last century — to refer to heavily illustrated or plate books which are still recognizably books — their form is the codex. But the artist's book, which is the term now most often used, is much more likely to be an experimental, kinetic object of some kind, only incidentally having an interest in the text."

Speaking of the artist's book, Jan says "in artist's books the book begins with the design or concept and that becomes the book's *raison d'être*. What separates an artist's book from what we do is that we allow the design, perhaps even require the design, to grow from the text." Crispin added, "The process is more linear and sequential in the traditional book, more causative, whereas I suppose the artist's book grows from a situation where all the elements ideally combine to form a whole in which nothing, including the text, takes precedence. There is a kind of rapt democracy about it. It's very modern. I'm not a democrat and I'm not particularly modern. I agree with Saintsbury's remark that the most degrading intellectual slavery is that of the exclusive present."

He referred to the Claire Van Vliet kind of book as a model of the best type of artist's book, and we looked at a copy of her *Aunt Sallie's Lament*, an accordion book in which the pages, on many varied papers, are die-cut in traditional quilting shapes. "This one is recognizably a book. It's a codex, but see how it's done — you can pull it apart and stretch it apart



— so it has a kinetic quality that a normal codex doesn't have and it can be viewed in a number of different ways, continuously as well as sequentially. It's almost like a machine for reading a text rather than simply an object which includes text."



PAPER

At Barbarian Press, Jan Elsted said, the choice of paper depends heavily on whether it's for a book primarily of wood engravings or primarily of text. For the *Endgrain Editions* they generally use the same paper all the time because it's best for printing wood engravings. It is called Zerkall, a mould-made paper from Germany with a smooth surface and deckled edges all the way around. "One of the things I like about it is that I can print on it dry rather than having to dampen the paper, because that is very laborious in itself and it slows down the whole process. Printing on dry Zerkall you get a really black, beautiful, crisp image; if you dampen the paper it is also very beautiful, but the image is greyer. There are no good papers for our purposes available in Canada, other than handmade papers from La Papeterie Saint Armand in Montreal, but there is also a papermaker in Vancouver now, Reg Lissell, whose paper Rollin Milroy uses at Heavenly Monkey. It's impressive, and we are looking forward to trying it ourselves when the right project comes along. Many of these papers are expensive so you have to select carefully what you want to print on them." She pulled out a beautiful sheet of handmade paper. "This is Kelmscott paper, for instance — more than 100 years old. We have a ream of it. It was handmade in about 1900. We got it from the Pierpont Morgan Library back in the '70s. They had a whole stash of it they had bought when it was made and they sold it at a ridiculously low price — about \$300 a ream."

MARKETING

As with most fine presses, Barbarian Press's proprietors try to be careful about their income, and sales of their books are slow. They sell mainly through subscriptions, where subscribers agree to buy one of every book produced. To date they have produced 32 books and most of them are out of print. The number of books produced in a year depends upon the

size of the book and what else they are doing that year. They attend an American book fair every year and every second year they go to one in Oxford. The Delaware Oak Knoll Fair is just for private presses, and they can expand their networks and market base a little. The Oxford Fair includes booksellers.

Barbarian Press has a very attractive website which helps sales, but it does worry them that there seems to be a shrinking market for fine press books. It is really hard to find new buyers. Libraries and booksellers are buying fewer books, but some new booksellers have emerged who are buying a few more books at present. Some libraries are also subscribers so they are steady, but in general the trend is that libraries are changing. The Elsteds say “we really don’t know the answers and it’s been about 25 years. The trick is not to imagine that you are ever going to have an income in the sense that most people have.”

OTHER MATTERS

One of the concerns Crispin Elsted expressed as a fine press proprietor had to do with the ‘workshop mentality’. It is apparently something about which he and friends and colleagues have been exchanging ideas, and he receives letters from around the world on the topic.

“Any craft like letterpress printing, or any other traditional craft, really must have an ongoing apprenticeship process in order to keep moving forward and to maintain its integrity. Unfortunately, the teaching of letterpress as a trade has virtually vanished — well, that of course had already started when we began to print 25 years ago — but at the same time a new interest in letterpress printing has accelerated exponentially in the last few years and since the start of the internet, simply because more people have come to hear of it. The interest is fine, but people’s notion of a profound commitment to anything, or a deep understanding of it, is often limited to bumper-sticker length because of the internet: their knowledge consists of bits of information instead of growing from branching discussions of something or consideration at any level which might emerge as truth or knowledge. And workshops, including the kind we do, I begin to think, are something of a danger.

“Think about what happens: a lot of people come to a workshop and work for a week with craftsmen who have acquired some knowledge of the craft over many years, and then the people go away and set up a shop and start printing. Often they have acquired only the barest minimum of

knowledge, and while they may be able to print at a basic level, they may not know enough to realize how much more they need to know, and if they pass that imperfect knowledge on – well, it can become rather like that parlour game where people whisper a story down a line and by the time it reaches the last person, the story bears no relation to what it was at the beginning. So it is terribly important that the basics be thoroughly taught, and that people understand something of the history of what they are doing too. The first day of our workshops consists largely of looking at books and talking about the history of printing before we ever get to the pressroom, and that goes on all week, every evening, and there should be much more of that.

“Now I don’t intend in any way to bad-mouth the people who have studied in these workshops with us, because all were genuinely interested and keen, and many have left here and gone on to consider the elements of design and type and the choice of founts and printing and publishing in light of that history. Since then, as a consequence, they have continued to grow. Rollin Milroy, who was in our first workshop, is a prime example. And in time, if they continue to grow, they’ll be able to take others under their wing and help them a lot. But we have also had apprentices who have come to stay with us for periods of time up to five months, living with us and working at the press in its day to day operation, and those people are in a much better position than the workshop attendants to be able to start a press and work with a real understanding of the range of what goes on. I am convinced that people who are interested in letterpress printing should take far more time than they take normally to investigate how to do the basic things — for instance, how to ink a press or set a composing stick — but they should also aim to understand much more deeply the relationship between things, the choice and editing of text, the placing of illustrations, design and format and layout, and the design in relation to the typeface. They should study as many books as they can get their hands on. All these things should be considered at length so there is a gathering of real knowledge.”

As we closed our interview time, we talked about the “philosophy” underlying printing and the learning experience. For Crispin and Jan, what people will get out of a workshop depends on what people bring to it. Do they think about what it means to ‘master’ the process? Do they consider how long it takes? And do they understand their own attitudes?

The Elsteds made the point several times that they came to printing not through the graphic arts, but through degrees in literature as they were working towards their doctorates in literature in England. As Crispin said as I left, “We acquired the craft of printing as an part of our desire to live with fine texts.” Their website says it concisely: “Our aims have not substantially altered since we founded the press: to publish poetry, translations, classics and *belles lettres* in a style which both glorifies the text and reveals it to the reader with a minimum of interference.”

A list of recent books printed by Barbarian Press:

The Eve of St. Agnes

A printing of the poem by John Keats, with wood engravings by Andy English
November 2003

Endgrain Editions Three:

Peter Lazarov Summer 2003

A Natural History of Surprise

Four Poems & an Essay by Crispin Elsted with a wood engraved frontispiece
by Peter Lazarov November 2002 OUT OF PRINT

A Sloth of Bears

A broadsheet of wood engraved devices from the first twenty-five years of
the press October 2002

Founts & Circumstance

A Typographical Portfolio of Display
and Titling Faces in Grand Isolation
& in Company July 2002 OUT OF PRINT

Endgrain Editions Two:

Abigail Rorer November 2001

Rumor of a Shark

poems by John Carroll November 1999

Inishbream

a novella by Theresa Kishkan
with 21 wood engravings by John DePol
April 1999 OUT OF PRINT

