

Alex McGuckin: “the book beautiful”

*To faithfully reproduce period bindings, this Edmonton bookbinder
apprenticed in Mexico and England, and
eventually taught himself how to machine his own tools*

By Peter Mitham



ALL OF US, AT ONE time or another, have been fascinated by artists' books—those often fancifully designed tomes that play with the book form to become *objets d'art* independent of the content. While the artist's book may deliver content worth reading, more often the thing being read is the object itself rather than what the original form was designed to contain.

Alex McGuckin makes books beautiful through his fine bindings, and like many book artists, the structures he creates for them speak to the content enclosed within. What sets his bindings apart, however, is a desire to have them announce the book in a language appropriate to what is being announced.

“When I went into this, I had no thought about entering the world of the craftsman,” he says during a conversation this past fall in his home studio. “I was pursuing this in a sort of purely selfish interest, this significant interest that I had in antiquarian books.”

His interest in antiquarian books led him steadily deeper into the world of book production, a trail that has found him learning almost every aspect of the designer bookmaking tradition.



Today he not only restores and reproduces period bindings but also develops new bindings that feature his own designs as well as the work of his own tools and craftsmanship.

For McGuckin it's about taking pride in the methodology and respecting the approaches and materials of the past. This has

given him greater insight into the creative process that informs the development of bookmakers throughout history. It has also allowed him to apply the full depth of that tradition to creating bindings for contemporary books that promise to stand the test of time.

“When you can recreate a design binding using tools that you've created yourself to incorporate into that design, then that is also very significant and I think speaks more to the creative process,” he explains. “The entire book becomes something that you have put your blood, sweat and tears into.”

His zeal for producing period bindings that honour the craftsmen of the era in which the books were originally produced is unique, and McGuckin's work—besides being well executed—maintains a tradition that came under siege as book production became industrialized during the 19th century and has all but ended today.

“It’s very important what we’re doing because we’re almost researching the way in which these things were done and then reimplementing that and keeping this craft alive in the period sense,” he says. “We’re as much historians as we are binders.” Without his interest in history, McGuckin might never have become a binder. “I had always envisioned that I was going to be a history professor, as early as (I think) 12 years old,” he says. “I set very specific goals for myself. My area of interest was Latin America, specifically Mexico.”

His dream took him to the University of Alberta in 1989, where one of his professors brought the class to the Bruce Peel Special Collections in the basement of the Rutherford South library. Librarian Jeannine Green showed the students some of the collection’s treasures and McGuckin was—in his words—“absolutely gobsmacked.”

“To see these books that you only see on television programs or behind locked glass in bookstores, to actually see them up close, was a real sort of defining moment for me. But just as you sort of walk through museums, they seemed like kind of untouchable objects.... And so I looked at it that way, as these beautiful objects always to be stored behind glass and not be handled or touched.”

When he went to England in 1995 to pursue a doctorate at Cambridge University, he was disabused of his attitude towards old books within his first week. Visiting the market square in Cambridge, he was naturally attracted to a vendor selling hard-bound books.

“There was a very large quantity of leather-bound books and it was a full-vellum 18th-century Italian poetry [that caught my eye]. And it was £2,” he recalls. “And at that moment I sort of lost my mind. I spent every spare pound that I had from then on acquiring as many antiquarian books as I could. And for me it was very much an aesthetic thing: Here were these beautiful objects, and I wasn’t as concerned about content as I was about the exterior of the book.”

Moreover, as a historian, McGuckin was drawn in by how the books might have been used by previous owners, a perspective that challenged contemporary prohibitions on handling older volumes. The books he could afford might have been falling apart, but they were falling apart through years of use (amply revealed by the marginalia in some volumes) as well as because of their age.

“It is hard for us sometimes to actually connect to that,” he says. “So it was a very empowering thing to be actually able to start acquiring these objects.”

The next phase of his development came during a research year spent at an archive in the colonial city of Puebla (formally, Heroica Puebla de Zaragoza), south of Mexico City. Books and printing flourished here a century before the arrival of a printing press in the United States, and in the basement of the archive where McGuckin was working was a restoration centre.

McGuckin asked the director if he could come in for a day and watch restorations taking place;



Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage (1783).

he was told something better, to go to a market in the centre of town where books were sold and bring one back to the centre. McGuckin would be taught how to rebuild it.



The inside covers of Ivor Bennett, *The Amazons* (1948), above and right.

“I am absolutely thrilled,” McGuckin recalls, his voice still full of amazement as he recalls the day. “I did as he instructed, brought the book back, and I ended up spending almost my entire year there. When I should have been in the archive researching for my thesis, I would spend my mornings in there working with these guys.”

The materials he needed were provided free of charge, and the skills he learned were invaluable. Working with books in a country that stands at the very origins of book culture in this hemisphere, with generous teachers, he learned much about applying modern techniques to traditional materials with the aim of preserving the inheritance of past generations.

“I feel very indebted to them,” he says. “They take a very modern approach to the binding of the book, which I have now moved away from, but the core knowledge of the conservation aspect came from Mexico.”

When he went back to England in 1997, he joined a bookbinding course that was actually a long-established gathering of bookbinding nerds that included librarians, professors, even a Nobel laureate.

“The bookbinders, the instructors, would just go from person to person, and they would help

them on an individual basis at whatever level they were at,” he says. “It was a community of people from all sorts of different backgrounds who had a love for this craft who would gather twice a week and just work on their projects.”

McGuckin returned to Canada in 1999, ready to put his new-found skills to work. But just as his perception of old books as untouchable objects was proven wrong in England, the knowledge he gained in Mexico and England had to be deepened by an apprenticeship to practitioners of the craft in Canada.

“It wasn’t until I met Courtland Benson and Michael Wilcox, two very important Canadian bookbinders, that my outlook and my skill set and everything changed completely and utterly,” he says. “These two gentlemen basically transformed my understanding of bookbinding and set me on a course that has taken me to a level that is much more significant than had I stayed in England.”



Benson, based in Victoria, and Wilcox, based in Toronto, became significant mentors for McGuckin. They set an example for him to follow, and their openness to answering his questions and sharing their working philosophies contributed to his own formation as both a craftsperson and an artist.

“Because I can see how they work, I can understand their individual philosophies and the way they approach bookbinding and it’s been an enormous education for me,” he says.

Benson's "feverish work ethic" that has scored him commissions from some of the world's top book dealers is inspiring to McGuckin, who notes that Benson had to acquire his skills through sheer perseverance and a willingness to travel if necessary to get the training required to faithfully execute period bindings.

Benson's example impelled McGuckin to not compromise when it came to reproducing works from the English Restoration of the late 1600s—a difficult era for many modern binders to honour because the tools, if not the materials, no longer exist. McGuckin, if he wished to produce a period

bookbinding, had to seriously consider issues such as the kinds of leathers used, binding practices (including the colours appropriate to headbands and other elements), and the tools used to decorate bindings.

"You can't buy those tools," he says bluntly. "The toolmaker that made those tools is long since departed, and any tools that might actually exist

from that period, which would be infinitesimal, would be so worn that you could not possibly use them. What Courtland [Benson] taught me was that you need to make your own tools."

Yes, the prospect seemed daunting to McGuckin at first, but he soon accepted its necessity (as did his wife, Colette, whose support has been critical to his zealous pursuit of his craft). Although he could have approached a toolmaker to prepare his tools, he couldn't count on the results being historically accurate. So he set up a shop at home, began machining his tools, and deepened his commitment to the task of bookbinding and the control he exercised over the creative process.

His commitment to cutting his own tools was affirmed in Michael Wilcox, a designer bookbinder producing sophisticated contemporary bindings. Wilcox's work underscored the importance of being able to produce tools and the liberty this gives the binder to realize fresh designs even though the methods may be quite traditional. This was different from how McGuckin previously viewed designer bindings.

"I had just wanted to be a period binder," he says. "However, when I met Michael Wilcox and became familiar with his work and the way in which he works and the way he approaches things, I became very much enamoured by the idea of recreating or creating a design reflective of the content of the book and doing it in a very thoughtful and meaningful way."

Despite the skills McGuckin has cultivated, he's not pretentious. Confident, yes; impatient with the satisfaction he feels many book artists have

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McGuckin designed an Eric Gill-style binding for University of Alberta librarian Robert Desmarais's copy of the exhibition catalogue for *Golden Cockerel's Polite Erotica*.



McGuckin cuts the finishing tools he uses in-house.

today with goals that short-change the tradition they're working within, yes.

He tells the story of visiting a binder whose bindings were held in high esteem. Yet none of the bindings displayed finishing—typically, gold inlays and other decorative features.

"I asked, 'Do you do any finishing?' And [the] response was, 'I don't believe in gold finishing,'" he recounts. "Now, what that said to me was, 'So, you just don't want to take the time to learn to do what is extraordinarily difficult.'"

The indictment sounds harsh, especially coming from a relatively young binder—



Alex McGuckin

McGuckin is a mere 38—but the success McGuckin has found bears out the rewards for those who persevere. His work is largely for private clients, while about 40 percent of his commissions are for institutional collections such as those at the University of Alberta.

Yet even the roster of clients he does have doesn't let him rest easy. Complacency is antithetical to his enthusiasm, and he candidly acknowledges that he has a lot to learn.

"My hope is that as years go by my skills improve, and I can ultimately make very, very beautiful examples of historical bindings or design bindings that people might admire," he says.

His goal is not to produce bindings that are merely interesting, but ones that represent the best possible work of human hands.

Beyond that, he would like to think the real significance of his work is to help ensure books of the sort that captured his own attention as an undergrad remain accessible to future generations of students. Books exist in history, and that means being read and used; well-made bindings, he believes, are critical to the transmission and life of the texts they're designed to contain.

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~ *Peter Mitham is editor of Amphora.*