

☞ *A World of Letters: Yale University Press, 1908–2008*

By Nicholas A. Basbanes
(Yale University Press, 2008, \$31.50)

Nick Basbanes said it himself when he was here lecturing in October 2008: The history of a university press, at least at first glance, would appear to be a rather dry and rather unpromising subject. But his lectures went on to prove that in the right hands just about any subject can be interesting and even downright entertaining. And Mr. Basbanes certainly had the right hands, given his deep and wide-ranging knowledge of world book culture and his ability to write and to speak in both a clear and interesting way.

How does Nick Basbanes bring clarity and interest to a work he was commissioned to write for the press itself? One way is by selecting the most cogent and interesting anecdotes out of the history of the press from amongst what must have been thousands of such stories. The second way, however, is by fully developing an over-arching theme that ties all of these anecdotal bits together. The anecdotes involve people, successfully published books and controversial books. The general unifying theme is how academic publishers, and indeed publishers of all stripes, must develop a publishing program that will clearly generate enough sales and income to allow the press to survive.

As an example of a larger than life character associated with the press, one might turn to Chester Kerr, its executive director from 1959 to 1979. Kerr has been described by one former colleague as “central casting’s dream of a scholarly publisher[,] with his relaxed English tailoring and Anthony Eden mustache, all wreathed in the mellow fragrance of pipe tobacco.” Underneath that relaxed manner and cloud of pipe smoke, however, was an “imposing presence.” “Not only was he physically large, but when he came into your office, you were well aware that he was there,” recalls another colleague. His successor as director summed him up in the following way: “With Chester, it very definitely was the Press *c’est moi*. He was a tremendous presence, and maybe

sometimes did get in the way. He was a brilliant promoter, but he was promoting himself as much as the Press itself at any one time. Sometimes it was great for the Press, but sometimes it got in the way.”

An example of the publication of a single book that carries along with it a very interesting story is the title *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale purchased the American rights to this book from a small London publisher, I.B. Tauris, but initially held very little expectations in the way of sales. The hardcover edition did reasonably well, selling about 4,000 copies when it appeared in the year 2000. A subsequent paperback copy sold at about the same rate. Then came September 11, 2001, and people in great numbers suddenly needed to know just who the Taliban were. With few competing titles, in the short space of a month and a half the book sold approximately 300,000 copies.

One of the more controversial of the press’s titles was *The Vinland Map and the Tartar Relation*. The book claimed to provide “clear and convincing proof that the first European voyager to visit North America was not Christopher Columbus in 1492 but the eleventh century Viking seafarer Leif Eriksson.” The impish Chester Kerr decided to announce publication of the book “a day before thousands of Italian Americans would celebrate Columbus Day throughout the United States.” Needless to say, Italian Americans were not amused. A further controversy developed somewhat later when a number of scholars questioned the map’s authenticity, leading to the conclusion that “the famous Vinland Map may be a forgery.” Nick Basbanes dubs the book “one of the most controversial titles in the history of the Press and one that manages to stir debate among scholars to this day.”

The cogent theme that runs throughout the book and that ties all of these disparate anecdotes together is how a publisher must establish a solid economic base for its publishing activities. Trade publishers, for example, search for the blockbuster manuscript (such as Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*) that will appeal to enough readers to generate profits that offset the cost of producing more modest titles.

Academic publishers, on the other hand, do not apply the blockbuster test when evaluating

manuscripts for publication. The editors at these presses attempt to find works of solid scholarship that will make a useful contribution to higher education and to society in general. This does not mean they are averse to titles that sell well, only that financial return is a secondary consideration. At times, however, much to everyone's surprise, an academic book will do very well indeed in the marketplace. Such a book was David Reisman's sociological study *The Lonely Crowd*. The initial print run was only 1,500 copies, but the book caught on with the general public and soon had sales of between 400,000 and 500,000 copies. Taking both hardcover and paperback editions into account, the book eventually sold close to 1.5 million copies.

A surer strategy, however, is for academic publishers to attempt to develop what are known as "steady sellers," books that have steady, if not dramatic, sales over a long period. The Bible, of course, leads the way as the steadiest selling book ever, with claims of between 2.5 billion and 6 billion copies sold, and these sales have immensely helped both Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press. Some American university press titles that have assisted their home institutions greatly are *The Chicago Manual of Style*, for the University of Chicago Press, and *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, for Columbia University Press.

Basbanes relates examples of both successful and lucrative series developed by the editors of Yale University Press over its long history. One of these was *The Yale Shakespeare*, "the most influential, significant, and widely known of anything that appeared under the Yale imprint," according to John Ryden, director of the press from 1979 to 2002. "It wouldn't be much of an exaggeration to say that TYS bears much the same relation to Yale as the *Bible* did to the presses of Oxford and Cambridge. It was the most enduring publication of the first fifty years," and along with a sister publication, the *Chronicles of America*, "kept the Press alive during the Depression."

REVIEWED BY RICHARD HOPKINS

~ *MacKellar, Smiths & Jordan: Typographic Tastemakers of the Late Nineteenth Century*
1908–2008

By Doug Clouse
(Oak Knoll, 2008, US\$65)

As I am a lover rather than a student of type, the attractive presentation of *MacKellar, Smiths & Jordan: Typographic Tastemakers of the Late Nineteenth Century* was enough to whet my appetite for its contents, which offer a smorgasbord of typefaces as well as insights into the work of a major Philadelphia type foundry of the latter 1800s.

Tracing MacKellar, Smiths & Jordan's roots from the late 18th century through to the decline of ornamented typefaces and establishment of the American Type Founders Co. in 1892, Clouse provides an intelligent, informed commentary that will appeal to students of the printing trades, book arts and the history of books as well as contemporary graphic designers looking for inspiration in typefaces by turns colourful, gaudy and—occasionally—thoroughly modern Gothic.

Clouse manages to capture both the spirit of the foundry and its designers as well as explain its position at the turning point that saw a division between high book arts and—for lack of a better distinction—the low book arts. MacKellar, Smiths & Jordan represent one of the last moments in an age when industrial production was still a folk art of sorts, something that Nicolette Gray believes "still expresse[d] the general taste of society." Clouse tells us how that was so, illuminating the role of the foundry in both promoting taste and tapping popular sentiment in the captions used to illustrate its typefaces in specimen books.

This monograph provides a comprehensive overview of MacKellar, Smiths & Jordan's own designs, offering a slice of the ornamentation that's synonymous with late-19th-century typesetting as well as bearing witness to the optimism and excesses of the era. There are also more subtle insights provided in the specimens shown; Clouse notes that firm principal Thomas MacKellar engaged in gentle satire in a manner that not only alleviated boredom for compositors but expressed "a nineteenth-century sense of humor that is particularly American." It eventually set the style for specimen showsbooks nationwide, setting an example still often followed today by designers of spirit. One thinks of specimens such as "Gender's Hempen Fenders" (in French Clarendon Shaded) and the Fancy Text–set "Mountebanks Bedecked in Heaven's." Pointing up the darker side of society is a specimen of Continental laid out to read, "*CREMATED CHINAMEN* | *Dust made for Pharmacautists*" and the heavily ornamented