

A Letterpress Pilgrimage

Jennifer Van de Pol



*Large-bellied, middle-aged men holding court
over piles of honey-soaked gulab jamun and
rose water flavoured sweets.
A sea of dried orange flower petal offerings,
strung together in vast ribbons, floating on the
Ganges River.
Scorching hot, creamy "chai" served in tiny clay
pots, sipped quickly and thrown out the
window of a moving train.
Dust-soaked children selling sun bleached
postcards to eager tourists.
Hands at heart, bowing deeply at the site where
Siddhartha awoke.*

Our memories of India stir every sense, and then some. My husband Adrian and I traveled from Vancouver to the north and northeast of the country in April 2008 on what began as a pilgrimage to some of the world's most renowned Buddhist sites but which quickly became a letterpress printing pilgrimage of sorts.

We had recently acquired a Vandercook press after I made my first artist's book with the generous help of Heavenly Monkey letterpress and binding studio in Vancouver. Within months of casually mentioning to Heavenly Monkey's Rollin Milroy that we were fantasizing about learning to letterpress print, we were rolling (and heaving and tugging) the Vandercook into our Vancouver apartment. This Indian journey was the first time we had parted with our three-ton baby and we lovingly remembered it in Banares, India, as we inquired if there were any letterpress printers in the city. On the third or so try, at a fantastic art and architecture bookstore on the ghats leading to the Ganges River, we received a passionate reply from a fellow bibliophile, who happened to be the owner of Kriti Gallery, a local contemporary art gallery. He insists on having material for all of his shows printed at the only letterpress in the city – a tiny, cramped, greasy, sweaty closet of a shop packed with four incredibly hard working men who were very surprised to see two white tourists curiously

gawking at their work and presses. This would turn out to be the first of several very moving interactions with printers during our journey. Having the opportunity to meet these men inspired us to continue asking people we met along the way if they had any connection to letterpress printing (or had ever heard of it, for that matter).

Next, we met Udaya Mani Pradhan in Darjeeling, whose family has a printing legacy that stunned us. After happening upon his "Mani Printing House" in the centre of town and expressing our interest in hearing his story, we were invited to spend the afternoon at his home where we sipped chai and learned that his grandfather, Dr. Parasmani, was the world's foremost Nepali grammarian (and much celebrated Nepali poet and academic). It is thanks to Dr. Parasmani that the Nepali language is taught in classrooms throughout Nepal, India, Bangladesh and around the world. During his lifetime he received a great number of prestigious literary awards from the Nepali, Indian, and British governments (to name just a few). Udaya and his brothers learned to operate presses early in life, becoming so proficient that they printed a popular biography of their grandfather, written by their father, as well as their grandfather's Nepali-English dictionary (the first of its kind). Upon parting, we were gifted with a copy of the biography, as well as a copy of one of Udaya's grandfather's first letterpress works – a small, alphabet pamphlet-book for children, to teach them the Nepali alphabet and basic grammar. We stumbled back to our \$5 hotel room, drunk on history and overwhelmed by the legacy human beings are capable of leaving in this world, in this case through the art of printing.

The last letterpress discovery we made was in the modest museum of Darjeeling's Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre. Teary eyed, we read about the lives of courageous refugees who built the centre from nothing on a dusty hilltop in Darjeeling. I heard Adrian gasp in an adjacent



The sole letterpress print shop in Banares, India.



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Udaya Mani Pradhan of the Mani Printing House in Darjeeling holds a copy of his grandfather's biography, which he and his brothers printed.



The old Victoria press at the Tibetan Self Help Refugee Centre in Darjeeling. The wood and metal blocks used in Tibetan Freedom are in the background.

room and rushed over to see a Victoria press sitting in the corner next to a wall of fascinating but deteriorating wood and metal blocks. Soon after, we met the manager of the centre who informed us that the press was used to print the very first *Tibetan Freedom* (*Bhoemi Rangwang*), a newsletter printed by and for Tibetans. Distributed across India and Nepal, and smuggled into Tibet, the newsletter informed refugees of the latest atrocities the Chinese government was committing against the Tibetan people.

We learned that in 1959, the year of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the Dalai Lama asked that a press be started to connect Tibetans with one

another at a time of extreme uncertainty. On March 10, 1960, the first anniversary of the Lhasa uprising, Mr. Gyalo Thondup (the Dalai Lama's elder brother) started the press in Kalimpong. The first newsletter was printed on a Gestetner-style machine, then the press moved to the refugee centre in Darjeeling. The old Victoria press we saw had been used to print the second and subsequent issues of *Tibetan Freedom* until 1997, when the centre began using offset methods.

We walked away from the centre with five blocks that were printed in the newsletter, loaned to us by the manager after we expressed concern about their condition. We promised to send them

back, along with prints. Our hope is that young Tibetans at the centre will see the prints and become curious about the press's history, and perhaps continue their ancestors' printing legacy. We plan to create a book incorporating prints from these blocks at our press this summer (with T.R.S.H.C.'s blessing, of course). What better way to tell the story of the refugee centre and its people than with the medium they and their spiritual leader chose to share their stories?

When he was honoured at Reidfest in 2007, Robert Reid said he'd never met a printer he didn't like. During our travels in India, we found the same generous, salt-of-the-earth kind of printer Reid talked about, people who invite you into their shops and homes to share their work and lives regardless of the time of day, no matter what was happening. The same generous spirit that ushered us into the world of letterpress printing here on the West Coast ran through the fast friends we made in India. One told us as he walked an hour out of his way to help us find a print shop in India: "You are the guest, you are god." Truly, we have been treated with a kindness and care from our printer friends befitting gods and goddesses.

~ *Jennifer Van de Pol and partner Adrian Robertshaw operate Strathcona Press in Cedar on Vancouver Island. They recently moved the press from a Vancouver apartment to a studio surrounded by a century-old apple orchard. The studio is open weekends or by appointment starting April 25, 2009. For details, visit www.strathconapress.com.*

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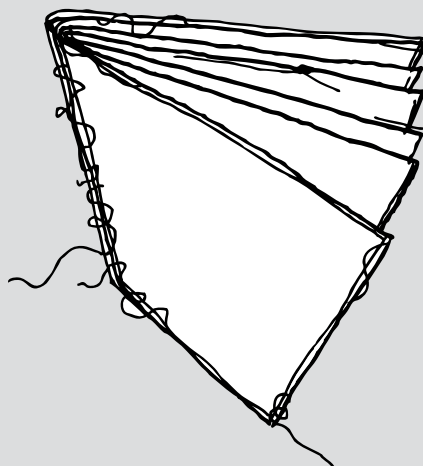
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PUBLISHING

Another startup

North Vancouver writer David Zieroth is a widely published and much respected poet. Since 1973 he has published seven books of poetry and a memoir, *The Education of Mr. Whippoorwill* (2002). I have known and admired his poetry for some time now and so when he contacted me last year to tell me he was starting his own private press, Alfred Gustav Press, I sat up and took notice. In fact, I promptly sent in my subscription for his Series One of chapbooks, subsequently published in December 2008 and featuring the work of Gillian Harding-Russell, *Apples & Mice* . . . ; Richard Therrien, *Water, Language, Faith*; and David Zieroth, *Dust in the Brocade*.

My three chapbooks arrived before Christmas. The writing was of a very high standard and the books were well designed and beautifully produced. I particularly liked the coloured vignettes on the front covers which were echoed on the title pages in uncoloured versions. I also liked the clean but compelling design. In fact, after reading and enjoying all three of the books, I felt compelled to quickly send off a message of appreciation to David: "You have indeed done a superb job with these chapbooks. They are both a pleasure to hold and a pleasure to read!"

But then I pondered to myself, what on earth prompted David to add yet another task to his busy schedule? Again, I fired off an e-mail but this time with a general query asking "Why?" David replied,

I started the Alfred Gustav Press as a micro press for poetry because I wanted to work with my hands and heart in a new way or, rather, in an old way, that is, I wanted to make objects that were lovely to hold, that were made by hand using the technology available in my home (clone, laser jet, steel edge, blade, pen and colouring pencil). I wanted to touch each piece of paper in each chapbook. And I wanted the poems to touch others.

David tells me that he wants to print poems that might not otherwise be available, prizing the

immediacy of poems that are "accessible and evocative, strong in insight and image." But who in the heck was Alfred Gustav? That didn't seem very accessible, on first glance. David's answer to me was both complete and satisfying:

I named the press after my father, a farmer both serious and taciturn yet not without charm and wit, sometimes melancholy, always hard working and a great lover of winter reading.

While the selections of Alfred Gustav Press may or may not reflect that kind of attitude or outlook towards life, David assured me that his selection of poems will exhibit both acumen and gusto. "I wanted to return to my father's way of working, especially when he repaired machinery: slowly and precisely, patiently, with the available tools, making what was necessary with the resources at hand," David told me.

Alfred Gustav Press plans to produce six chapbooks a year, three in the spring and three in the fall. The print run will be limited to the number of subscriptions on file previous to each printing, as well as five copies apiece for the authors (who, by the by, sign all copies). "Thus I know exactly the number to produce and to whom each copy will be sent," David told me, showing some of the acumen behind the press. The gusto comes in the pleasure David hopes to deliver to each recipient. "I think of the readership as small but intense," he says. "I imagine their pleasure on receiving the chapbooks in the mail as equal to mine in producing them."

The next series of chapbooks will be available in May 2009 for a mere \$10 (A bargain by any measure). The lineup includes Christopher Levenson, *Habitat*; Susan McCaslin, *Persephone Tours the Underground*; and Matt Rader, *Reservations*.

~ Richard Hopkins is a Vancouver book collector and former editor of *Amphora*.