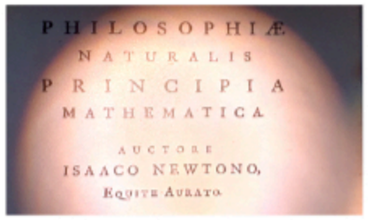


A PUBLISHING FANTASIA *by John Hudson*

"We'll take you the long way round," says Heidi Mulvey, Head of Community Engagement, who greets me with her colleague, Cambridge University Press Archivist, Ros Grooms.

Brightly lit corridors lead into a vast office where staff are working on today's Cambridge University Press publications. But I am here to visit the past, to get a glimpse of the oldest working printing and publishing house in the world.

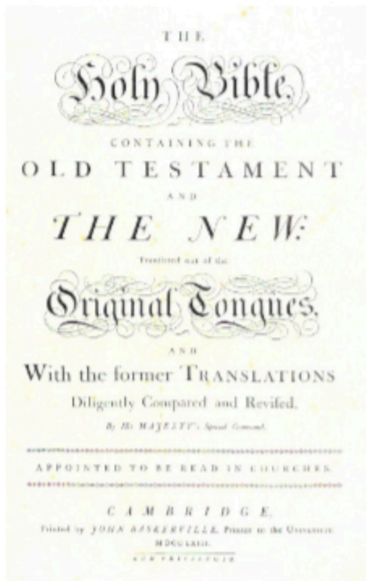


Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, a facsimile of the second edition, published in 1713 by Cambridge University Press

A few twists and turns where, occasionally, Heidi points into the distance and announces, "that's Bibles down there," and "English language teaching is behind us", and we enter a corridor where history is physically in front of me. Here are many of the presses and typesetting machines that have produced some of the world's most important publications, including work from over 170 Nobel laureates.

Before I arrived I was prepared to recount a straightforward history: 1534, Henry VIII granted letters patent; 1583, Thomas Thomas was appointed University Printer; 1591, John Legate printed the first Cambridge Bible... but I soon realise that, in fact, I am in a space where every object has a story, where the mechanical, intellectual and human meet, where eccentricity and expertise combine to create a time capsule. The Cambridge University Press Museum is a treasure trove that bears witness to all manner of human endeavour, from discovering the workings of the universe to organising staff tea breaks.

I ask Ros about John Milton's *Lycidas* which was first published in 1638. I am taken to a cabinet, where a facsimile of the page shows Milton's corrections (the original is held in Cambridge University Library). And there, near the end of the poem is Milton's handwriting with a line inserted. Here is one of England's finest poets revising at the last moment, even as the poem goes to press.



The Baskerville Bible of 1763

Ros explains that Cambridge University Press is notable for its insistence on quality: the paper, the binding, the ink, the design. The Press is a benchmark for excellence, not only in scholarship but in production standards.



Baskerville Punches: steel rods with a letter carved backwards on its end, driven into a plate of softer metal to leave an impression of the letter.

To demonstrate her point, I am taken to another cabinet. I am looking at Baskerville, more precisely, punches for a typeface designed by University Printer, John Baskerville that gave distinction to the *Folio Bible* of 1763, described as "one of the finest books ever to have been printed in Britain". The Bible sits open nearby.

As I make out that the punches of various point sizes and cases spell out "Baskerville Punches", Ros tells the story.

"The printing equipment was sold to the French playwright, spy and gun-runner, Beaumarchais. It was active during and survived the Revolution in Paris but fell into disuse until extant parts were returned to Cambridge by Charles Peignot of the French foundry Deberny and Peignot, in 1953. Fortunately, there were enough punches remaining to create the display in front of you."

Now I am inspecting a page of the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published between 1910 and 1911. The caption tells the story of how Ernest Shackleton took the eleventh edition on board his ship *Endurance* on his ill-fated and now legendary attempt to cross the Antarctic continent. He knew it would be a lifeline of entertainment and education. Fire-damaged pages from the Shackleton expedition copy of the encyclopaedia are held at the Polar Museum in Cambridge.



A Map of the Antarctic, taken by Shackleton on his expedition

Nearby is a complete set of the eleventh edition, housed in its original shelving that was, at that time, sold along with the volumes. These were donated by an alumnus of the University of Cambridge, who wanted them to go to an appropriate home.

"What is remarkable about this museum," explains Heidi, "is the incredible involvement and commitment of contributors, volunteers and visitors since it opened in 2011. These are not only objects collected, but people's lives, their stories."

The central reference point for all these stories, their veracity, their uniqueness and liveliness, is the three-volume *A History of Cambridge University Press* written by David McKitterick, another benchmark of quality and design. Indeed, Ros has cause to refer to it several times during my visit. She does so at the very large desk which belonged to legendary editor, Michael Black and which now offers a focal point for discussion in the museum.

"This desk has many stories to tell," says Ros. "You see, there is room for two people seated here, facing each other. It was at this desk that a junior editor would sit and watch and learn as the publisher made decisions affecting publications. It



Voltaire's *Essay on Milton*, the 1954 Christmas Book

was over this desk that the expertise and vision of the publishing house was passed on."

The care and commitment invested in learning the craft is delightfully embodied in the annual production of the *Christmas Book*, presents for colleagues, associates and customers that the Press produced each Yule between 1930 to 1973.

Executed by apprentices working alongside experts, the slim volumes display excellence in typography, book production and design to their no-doubt delighted recipients. Subjects range from aspects of printing to Cambridge's bridges or Waterways of the Fens. As I look through a pile of them seated at Michael Black's desk, I pick out the 1954 edition, a reprint of Voltaire's *Essay on Milton*, set in Baskerville. I discover that it was in order to print this, the only work written by Voltaire in English, that Beaumarchais purchased the Baskerville typeface nearly two hundred years earlier. I feel I have come full circle.

I ask Heidi and Ros for another story, the story of how this remarkable museum came about.

"We realised that as the world of printing and publishing changed and new technologies and means of communication were introduced, we were in danger of quite simply throwing out so much of our history, of our identity, and with that would disappear all the characters and stories that have made the Press the colourful and vibrant place it has always been."

Ros says that she sent out an email which said: "be careful what you throw away." Within days, boxes of artefacts began arriving in her office. She reflects, with some amusement, she salved the conscience of many, becoming the arbiter of the destiny of so many artefacts and papers.

"If something valuable was thrown away, it meant the archivist was to blame. I had to read and inspect everything!"

After such a remarkable compendium of characters and tales, I finish my visit by asking about the future. It is no surprise to hear that this is a publishing and printing house which has its eye focused on developing skills and talent. Heidi manages the Press apprenticeship programmes that look to build on a prestigious past. Ros explains:

"The Press has always employed apprentices, and we have an apprenticeship indenture for John Dean Rumsey dated 26 November 1887 in the Press Archive. It was given by his descendant who visited the Press Museum."

Heidi adds: "Apprenticeships are playing a big part in helping us attract diverse new talent into publishing, and our apprentices are bringing in fresh and innovative thinking. Most of our apprentices stay at the Press when they have finished their apprenticeships and have opportunities to continue their development and gain promotions."

As I exit the museum into the corridor lined with salvaged black printing presses resembling monumental sculptures, I feel sure that both apprentices and more experienced professionals at Cambridge University Press will continue the tradition of excellence in publishing and provide remarkable stories to be housed, one day, in this museum.

Find out more about Cambridge University Press at www.cambridge.org.



Heidi Mulvey and Ros Grooms