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William Caxton: Pioneer English printer

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Abstract

It is the purpose of this study (1) to discover any factors in William Caxton's early life which might have led him to become a printer; (2) to learn how Caxton established his printing press in England; (3) to examine Caxton's printing business in relation to his competitors; (4) to determine the quality of literature translated by Caxton and printed by his press; (5) to determine if Caxton did contribute to the standardization of the English language.

William Caxton: Pioneer English Printer

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Faculty of the Library Science Department

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Master of Arts

Dana Crawford

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Read and approved by

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

William Caxton, who was an Englishman, established the first printing press in England and was the first printer to use the English language in his printing. When someone is the first to do something, he is subject to open evaluation of how or what he may have done. Caxton as a pioneer printer in England has been subject to evaluation to determine if, indeed, he did contribute to the art of printing and establish a new venture with a good beginning.

Statement of the problem

It is the purpose of this study (1) to discover any factors in William Caxton's early life which might have led him to become a printer; (2) to learn how Caxton established his printing press in England; (3) to examine Caxton's printing business in relation to his competitors; (4) to determine the quality of literature translated by Caxton and printed by his press; (5) to determine if Caxton did contribute to the standardization of the English language.

Chapter 2

PROCEDURE

During the summer, 1971, I made a literature search to learn what I could about William Caxton and his work as a printer. This was to satisfy a class assignment at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa. Information seemed hard to come by, but enough was found to sustain my interest in Caxton's work. I resumed this literature search at the time of an approval of the topic for a graduate research paper. This was done at the nearest university library which happened to be the main library at the State University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa. I was hoping that I would be able to find more and newer sources of information in this recent search.

Chapter 3

When one studies the life of William Caxton, it is easy to see how one learning led to another. To begin with, William Caxton was born and lived in the Weald of Kent in his early years. There is some dispute about the date of his birth, but Blake considers it to be the year, 1422. His parents had sent Caxton to school for which he was bound to pray for them the rest of his days.

Caxton was fifteen or sixteen years old when he was apprenticed to Robert Large, who was a rich London mercer and eventually became Lord Mayor of London. The fact that Caxton was apprenticed to Mr. Large leads one to think that Caxton's own parents were in a good position.¹

In 1462 or 1463 Caxton was established in the important office of governor of the English Nation in the Low Countries.² This was a public spirited man playing a part in the general affairs of his trade in Bruges.

The rulers of Burgundy held their court in Bruges. The Duchess, wife of Charles the Bold, was Margaret of York, sister of King Edward IV of England. Part of Caxton's

¹Dorothy Margaret Stuart, "William Caxton: Mercer, Translator and Master Printer," History Today, 10:257, April, 1960.

²Douglas C. McMurtrie, The Book: The Story of Printing and Bookmaking (New York: Covici, 1937), p. 217.

duties as governor was to negotiate with the court of Burgundy for the privileges of trade. Thus, he became acquainted with the ruling family.

When Caxton's health was not good in 1469, he left his position as governor of the English Nation and went into the service of the Duchess of Burgundy as a financial advisor.³ Yet, being industrious by nature and "having no charge of occupation", he made it a practice of devoting a certain number of hours each week to translating a French book into English.⁴

One of the first books which Caxton translated was a story which was popular at the time, Le Fevre's Le Recueil de Troy. When Caxton had completed five or six squires, he stopped his translating work waiting for the opportune moment to present his work to the Duchess. She was interested in his work and urged Caxton to finish the translation. The Duchess was pleased with the manuscript and her appreciation made the translation popular.⁵ So many of Caxton's friends wanted a copy of the translation of the Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy that Caxton was interested in seeking a means of escape from the drudgery of writing copies as it was hard on his eyes and he grew tired of writing.

³Frederick Harrison, A Book About Books (London: John Murray, 1943), p. 105.

⁴Francis Rogers, Painted Rock to Printed Page (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1960), p. 133.

⁵Holbrook Jackson, The Printing of Books (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1947), p. 191.

Printing was known as a means of making cheaper books in most of the larger communities of Northern Europe and in Italy by 1470. William Caxton had heard about a young printer who was one of many to have learned the printing trade in Mainz. This printer had recently opened a shop in Cologne. Cologne as a center of education was the seat of a related rapidly growing industry. An increasing demand for textbooks had resulted in Cologne becoming the world's most active center for printing at that time.⁶

Everything Caxton was told about the art of printing intrigued him. Still, he found it hard to believe that any printer could turn out in a single day as much as a copist could write in several months' time. In order to accelerate the circulation of his own translations, Caxton decided to learn the art of printing when he was near the age of fifty.

When Caxton went to Cologne he made it a point to call at the printers'. This proved to be a turning point in Caxton's life. It is generally thought that it was during his residence at Cologne for about eighteen months in the years 1471 and 1472, that he learned the art of printing. Caxton perfected himself in it under Colard Mansion, one of the earliest printers in Bruges.⁷ He worked partnership with Mansion for two or three years before he returned to England to introduce printing to his native country. While

⁶George Parker Winship, William Caxton and his Work (Berkeley: University of California, 1908), p. 5.

⁷Harrison, op. cit., p. 106.

Caxton was in Bruges he printed two books and an indulgence. His Recuyell was printed in 1474 or 1475. The following information is included in the epilogue to the third part:

this story named the Recule of the Historyes of troyes thus emprynted as ye here see were begonne in oon day, and also finished in oon day.⁸

The second book also translated from the French was The Game and Playe of Chesse. These first English books were printed by an Englishman who was not in England, but in Belgium.

Sometime in 1476 Caxton returned to England and set up the first English press under the shadow of Westminster Abbey marked with a sign with a red pale or band across it. Caxton paid the rent for the shop in Westminster, at least it was accepted in his name. Caxton also paid for the equipment and its installation needed to open his printing establishment. All the equipment had been brought to England from Belgium. Caxton had guaranteed an income in wages to the men who worked for him. These wages were satisfactory enough to the workers to induce them to leave home and cross the Channel.⁹

Caxton secured the font with which he began his first printing at Louvain from John Veldener, a printer and type founder.¹⁰ Caxton employed eight fonts of type during

⁸David Greenwood and Helen Gentry, Chronology of Books and Printing (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), p. 21.

⁹Winship, op. cit., p. 30.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 42.

his sixteen years as a printer. His typographical style did not improve until he was threatened with competition from other printers. It is believed that Caxton was his own type founder after his arrival at Westminster.

At this time paper was still handmade, sheet by sheet. Caxton had to import his paper from the European continent as there was no papermill in England until near the end of the fifteenth century.

One must remember that Caxton was a normal businessman of more than average intelligence. Caxton had had a successful business life as a mercer. Once he had learned the art of printing it became more than an avocation with him. Caxton could exhibit his wares on a stall outside his printing establishment. The members of the House of Commons had to pass Caxton's shop as they went to and from the House. He also had ads published about his books. Caxton hung these ads in various places in the city where people would pass as they were on their way.¹¹

Publishing was a paying proposition for Caxton. Very few of his works appeared without patronage or without a ready demand on the part of the book-buying public. When he published without safeguards, he chose works of English poets, such as Gower, Lydgate and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.¹² Caxton encouraged the printers to do work for

¹¹Norman Strouse, "Advertising," The New Book of Knowledge (1971), I, 34.

¹²The History of Reynard the Foxe p. 31.

anyone who might have a job of printing to be done.¹³

During the years that Caxton was a printer until his death in 1491, he had printed one hundred works. Of the known seventy-seven titles, 45 percent were devotional; 29 percent were literary or historical; 14 percent were instructive; and 12 percent were official papers.

Caxton as a pioneer printer went on his own way. He was interested in becoming a plain, practical printer. In fact, he imitated the familiar Medieval manuscript in his books. Caxton was interested in the text of books rather than their appearance. Admirers of Caxton are inclined to criticize him because his books were lacking aesthetic value and he did not adopt fresh features which he must have noticed in foreign books.¹⁴

Direction words at the bottom of the page were used by other printers, but not Caxton. All of his books are without a title page. He seldom used capital letters either for proper names or to begin sentences.¹⁵

Caxton did not illustrate any of his books until the year 1481 which was five years after he had begun printing in England. The first book published with illustrations was The Mirror of the World. Caxton was not interested in printing as an art or beauty. Instead he thought of printing

¹³Winship, loc. cit.

¹⁴Jackson, op. cit., p. 188.

¹⁵John Clyde Oswald, A History of Printing (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1928), pp. 192-195.

as a means of spreading knowledge and the love of reading.

Caxton wanted to introduce English readers to the high culture of European romance as well as English prose and poetry. He printed for the English market with a strong bias towards his own personal tastes of poetry, literature, and games. His many volumes of poetry and romance may have stimulated the demand for such literature. He delighted in printing those books which appealed to him as a reader. "He liked to think his publications might be beneficial to the minds or morals of his fellow countrymen".¹⁶

Once his printing press was set up, Caxton lost no time in getting to work is proved by the issue date of an Indulgence. He published several pamphlets before printing his first book on English soil which was Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres translated from the French by Earl Rivers. Caxton added his humorous chapter to the book concerning women. This first dated book printed in England was finished on 18 November 1477.¹⁷ By the end of the following year he had printed upwards of twenty books.

Caxton intended that none of his printing would be for children. He thought that the young should read only what would instruct or improve them.

Among the first books he issued in his first year of printing in England was the Booke of Curtesye or Lytyll

¹⁶Oswald, loc. cit.

¹⁷Harry Gidney Aldis, The Printed Book (Cambridge: University Press, 1951), p. 12.

John. This is a rhyming book of verse for boys on how to mind their manners in the households of the great. There are directions given for saying prayers on rising; on dressing; table manners; serving a superior; and walking in the street.¹⁸

Stans puer ad Mensam which was written by John Lydgate was also printed by Caxton in 1477. It is in couplets, all pertaining to the rigid etiquette which was taught to the boys to prepare them for the military life.¹⁹

Caxton printed these books on manners because he felt this was part of the past which could be carried onward. This literature was the literature of the day. Caxton was going to print what the public wanted to read.

Besides Malory's De Morte Darthur Caxton published two other books which in some degree have made their place in children's reading. The History of Reynard the Foxe was Caxton's own translation of a satire and romance by Wilhelm, a Flemish poet.

Small details within the story were added, omitted, or changed to either bring the story into line or to make the story flow more naturally. Caxton did not want to spend the time to create his own version of the tale. He was content to adapt the Dutch story to make it more

¹⁸Cornelia Meigs and others, A Critical History of Children's Literature (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 29.

¹⁹Ibid.

acceptable to his English audience.²⁰

The History of Reynard the Foxe is a thoroughly, amusing beast fable. Reynard is a clever animal who outwits all the rest, getting the better of every creature who is sent against him. The satire in the story has no meaning for the very young reader. The young are fascinated by beasts talking and behaving like human beings when it is well presented as it is done with Reynard.

Far more important to young readers was Caxton's publishing of the Fables of Aesope. The stories went through many hands before they were gathered up by Stainhower, a fifteenth century German. This version was used by Jules Machault, a monk of Lyons, who made the French translation. Caxton did not realize that he had a sad story in the making. He chose fables:

for to shew all manner of folk what manner of thing they ought to ensue and follow. And also what manner of thing they must and ought to leave and flee, for fable is as much to say in poetry as owrds in theology.²¹

Aesop is perhaps the oldest and most beloved of the ancient classics which Caxton gave to the English world.

Unlike the early printers of other countries Caxton produced very little ecclesiastical literature because of a limited demand. Neither he nor his immediate contemporaries attempted editions of the Bible. Possibly

²⁰The History of Reynard the Foxe lix.

²¹F. J. Darton, Children's Books in England (Cambridge: University Press, 1958), p. 10.

he knew of the financial disaster of more than one printing enterprise. Familiarity with the Holy Scriptures on the part of the laity was discouraged in Caxton's time and the time immediately preceding him.²² Caxton was a staunch Catholic and translation of the Scriptures had been repeatedly forbidden by the Church in Rome.²³

Caxton himself probably took on a large share of the work in printing and correcting in the early days of the press. When his workmen became more experienced, he may have done no more than look in on his printing shop from day to day. Caxton then could confine his work to the translating and editing of books.²⁴

Caxton translated twenty four works from the Latin, French, and Dutch between the years 1469 and 1491. All but one were printed in his shop. Each work which Caxton translated was dated when it was completed. However, the work was not dated at the time it was published.²⁵

The English language was in a period of rapid change during the time Caxton was a printer. Foreign words were being added to the vocabulary. A standard based on court usage and the London dialect were beginning to emerge. People were becoming more conscious of dialects

²²Oswald, loc. cit.

²³Henry R. Plomer, William Caxton (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1925), p. 95.

²⁴Ibid., p. 90.

²⁵McMurtrie, op. cit., p. 224.

and differences in speech habits due to social classes.²⁶

During the fifteenth century in England manuscripts were being produced not only by monastic scriptoria, but by shops staffed with professional scribes as well. Most of the scribes within a particular establishment followed a local standard or a house style of English so that today it is often possible to trace a manuscript to a locality or to an individual establishment according to Blake.²⁷

Caxton had business connections with some of the shops and scriptoria. It ought to have been possible for him either to learn from the scribes the acceptable standard English or to employ a scribe to standardize the language of the books coming off the press.

Blake also suggests that Caxton was not interested in a standardization of this sort. His vocabulary reflects that of the particular work he is translating. His spelling takes on the color of the language from which he is working. His irregularity in spelling may reflect carelessness because of his haste and lack of correction.²⁸

However, Blake states one cannot be critical of Caxton for he was reflecting an attitude of his age. There was little interest in spelling at that time so naturally he gave it no attention.

²⁶N. F. Blake, Caxton and his World (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969), p. 171.

²⁷Ibid., p. 172.

²⁸Ibid., p. 174.

The standardization of a text was as much the responsibility of the compositor as it was the printer. Caxton's first compositors were foreigners who were acquainted with printing, but not with the English language.²⁹ An English compositor acquainted with the professional scribes' spellings would have produced a more standardized English spelling.

Caxton's interest was confined to vocabulary. He took over many foreign words in his translations and borrowed words from other English authors in his original writings. However, studies have shown that Caxton's personal vocabulary was small and he failed to develop it at all. He also introduced few words into the English language without some suggestion of some source. These words rarely became part of his permanent vocabulary.³⁰

When printing English works, Caxton did change those words which were obsolete or words which were no longer fashionable.³¹

When Caxton was using a source, his sentences reflect the sources which he closely followed. When he had to compose sentences on his own, his writing tends to become a series of clauses linked together. One clause after another would suggest something else to him to

²⁹Winship, loc. cit.

³⁰Blake, op. cit., p. 176.

³¹Ibid., p. 188.

write so his sentences are long and rambling.³²

Aurner believes that Caxton did more than any other man before or since his time to bring about the standardization of the English language.³³

Schlauch states that Caxton was aware of his responsibilities in helping to standardize the English language. When Caxton was faced with variant forms of the same word he admitted that he was disturbed and disapproved of variety. Schlauch reports, "Caxton was eager to have a standard of English recognized for printed books".³⁴

³²Ibid., p. 189.

³³Nellie Slayton Aurner, Caxton: Mirror of Fifteenth-Century Letters, A Study of the Literature of the First English Press (London: Philip Allan & Co., Ltd., 1926) p. 203.

³⁴Margaret Schlauch, The English Language in Modern Times (Since 1400) (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) pp. 40-41.

Chapter 4

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There are several factors in Caxton's life that might have led him to become a printer. His parents has provided him with an education. Caxton had a keen love of learning and a respect for the vernacular.

According to Blades, Caxton excelled as a linguist.³⁵ He had the courage to be himself and talk his own language. He could of necessity speak and read French. The Flemish tongue was used in much of his business when he was a mercer in Bruges.

Caxton's work as a translator led him to learning the art of printing. After many of his friends had requested his English translation of the Recuyell of The Historyes of Troy, Caxton felt that printing would enable him to provide the translation to every one at the same time which he wanted to do.

Caxton established his printing shop near Westminster Abbey. He brought everything he needed to set up a printing press from the European continent. This included type font, equipment, paper, and workmen.

³⁵William Blades, The Biography and Typography of William Caxton: England's First Printer (London: Turner and Co., 1877), p. 88.

Caxton has been criticized for printing books which resembled the Medieval manuscript, having little aesthetic value. His printing improved only after being threatened by competition. There was no information to report on the total number printed of each book.³⁶ Sometimes one copy is still in existence or maybe three or thirty three. Yet, the books which remain are highly valued and expensive.

Even though printing was a new and faster method of producing books, books were neither plentiful nor inexpensive. Books were too costly for the average purse. Caxton must have had well-to-do friends or had friends in court as customers for his printed books.

Caxton used his knowledge to his best advantage. After his press was in operation, Caxton then was not doing the work as a printer. Caxton began to confine his work to that of translator. He was translating and editing literature which would eventually be printed by his printing press.

One of Caxton's most important contributions was the English literature for which he was responsible for translating. Caxton was interested in cheap printing, but not cheap literature. This paper in no way is an attempt to discuss all that he printed. Included are the important firsts and any literature which was adopted

³⁶Plomer, op. cit., p. 102.

by young readers, even though it was Caxton's intent that his literature would not be read by children.

Caxton was aware of the unsettled English language. After reading Blake's analysis of Caxton's knowledge of the English language and how he used variant forms, I can only conclude that a greater development toward standardization of the English language came after Caxton's time.

William Caxton, an Englishman who printed the first English books in England, will be remembered as a pioneer printer who shared with others his reading pleasures.

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