

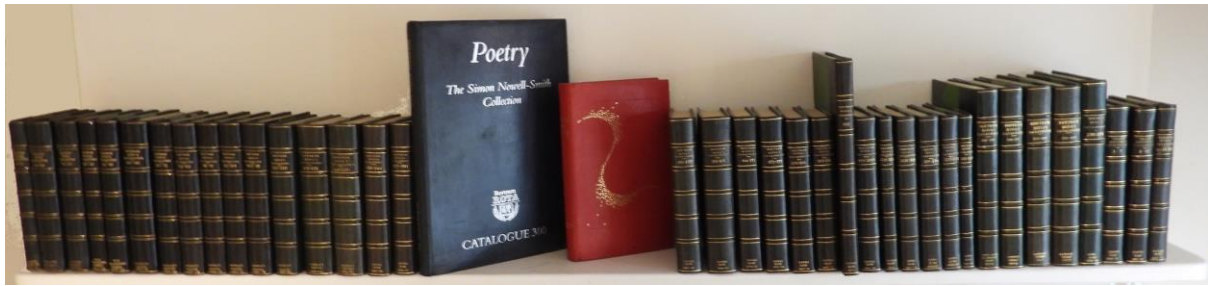
Bertram
ROTA



Celebrating One Hundred Years

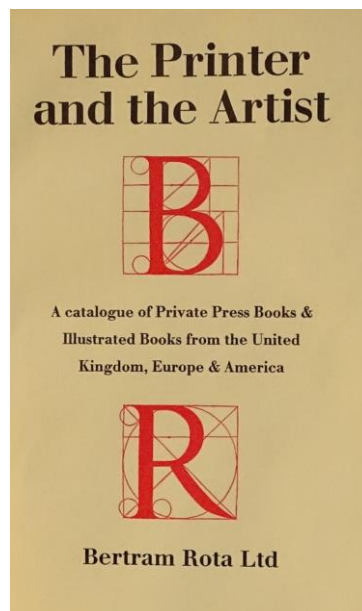
1923-2023

February



A bound set of our catalogues with, in the centre, a specially bound copy of my father's *Books in the Blood*. For that red was the obvious choice of colour, with a trail of small gilt circles to represent blood cells.

I have been thinking back on a few of our special catalogues, firstly the widely praised *The Printer and the Artist*, issued from our Savile Row premises in 1974. For many years until its recent demise, those words were our username and password, chosen for us by Dan and Kathy Leab, for the online version of *American Book Prices Current*.



The firm has always taken pride in our attempts at typographical elegance, and this catalogue really did excel in that respect. It comprised 1,320 items with a strong emphasis on German printing and German illustrated books – perhaps for that reason the catalogue was not a great success in a largely English-speaking market. Almost all of the books came from a single private collection, that of Robert Elwell, and most of them bore his bookplate designed by Reynolds Stone. The hugely entertaining and characterful Mr Elwell and his utterly delightful wife Gay were good enough to allow me to stay in their New York apartment on Lexington Avenue for a month when I worked for Argosy Book Store during my year between school and university. I am not sure how they put up with me – I was going through a rather ‘difficult’ phase.

The foreword began: “The books in this catalogue ... either represent or chronicle developments in the production of fine books in the Western world from 1890 to the present day. They present opportunities for study of the historical and geographical movements of typographical ideas and influences. The books include examples of the work of the best paper-makers, type designers, typographers and printers, as well as those artists who concerned themselves with book illustration. The title of the catalogue is intended first to underline the division that has come to exist between the printer and the designer...”

Rather more commercially successful was our catalogue concerning the First World War, published in our regular small octavo format, but distinguished by the breadth and depth of knowledge of the cataloguer, our colleague Peter Scott.

We were fortunate to be chosen by Keith Miller, son of the renowned bookseller A.T. “Dusty” Miller, to value and subsequently sell on his behalf two Sherlock Holmes manuscripts, as well as a first edition of *On the Origin of Species* in mint condition – for rather less than the six-figure sums demanded for such a thing now.

We then were asked to take on the entire collection. Largely nineteenth and twentieth-century literature were most strongly featured, but there were books on science and travel too. As well as a book about the discovery of columbium, later niobium, one slightly strangely stands out. Sadly the details are lost to my computer and my memory, but it was a book entirely about anil, the shrub which yields indigo. Rare, obscure and perhaps about as niche as it gets. We had it for a long time and took it to a number of book fairs over the years. I thought we would never sell it. It was in California though that a sweet, elderly couple approached our stand, honed in on it and exclaimed, “That’s the book we’ve been looking for, for years, that is the book which will complete our collection.”

My father wrote of Dusty Miller:

“A.T. “Dusty” Miller was one of the great modern first edition dealers of his generation. Together with my father and Percy Muir he made up the triumvirate which brought respectability and a sense of order to the collecting of modern first editions. When he wrote about book collecting he did so with confidence and authority, expressing himself clearly and logically.

He was a convivial man by nature and whenever I summon up a mental picture of him, I catch him with a smile on his face or a deep chuckle in his throat. With two of his bookseller friends who happened to share the same initials - Dudley Massey and David Magee - he constituted the entire membership of the so called “DM Club”. When David Magee published his monumental three-volume catalogue of Victorian books and manuscripts he dedicated it “to the other members of the DM Club without whose enthusiasm, encouragement and advice this catalogue would have been finished in half the time”.

When Dusty Miller was seeking to retire he invited me to make an offer for the business he operated as Frank Hollings Bookshop. With my colleague Ronald Taylor I went over to Hollings, in its attractive quarters in the shadow of St

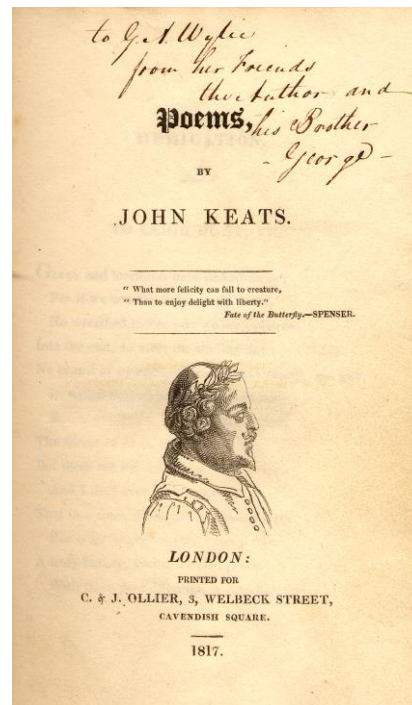
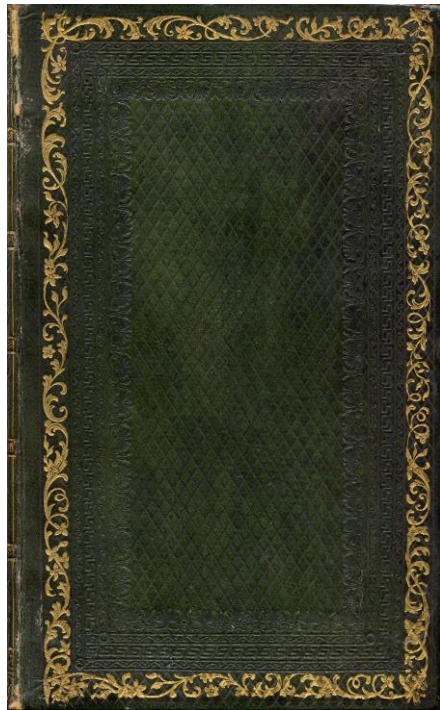
Bartholomew the Great. It was packed with books in little rooms on four floors. Ron Taylor and I tried to divide the work between us according to our areas of specialisation. Thus I might start to value a room which seemed to be full of 19th and 20th Century literature, only to find some important colour-plate books and an early mathematical treatise shelved between T S Eliot and Ernest Hemingway. Meanwhile across the landing Ron was having much the same experience in reverse.

I called downstairs to Dusty and asked him if he could come up for a moment to explain to us the way in which the stock was arranged. "Arranged?" he replied. "This is the system. When I buy a short fat book I look for a short fat hole on the shelf!"

Dusty tended not to price his books, although each bore a pencil note of its date of purchase and its cost in a simple numerical code. When a customer asked the price of a given volume (and it should be remembered that only invited guests got above the ground floor shop), Dusty would look at the book, then look at the customer, think for a moment and finally quote a figure. On one occasion, the American dealer Henry Wenning took exception to this practice and after Dusty had inspected him from his polished shoes to his elegantly cut bespoke jacket Henry said "Mr Miller, it's the book you are supposed to be pricing, not me!"

In 2002 we produced our 300th catalogue. This was the astounding and magnificent Simon Nowell-Smith collection of poetry of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, the catalogue of which can be seen in a specially commissioned blue morocco binding, lettered and decorated in silver, next to the copy of *Books in the Blood* in the photograph at the head of this piece. Simon was a close friend of my grandfather and we had had the selling of his Henry James and Robert Bridges collections, when he felt they had become as good as they could possibly be. His criteria for poetry were exacting – his acquisitions were of poets' first or at least very early books, usually in superlative condition, with presentation and association copies abounding, inscriptions having to be contemporary with the year of publication and almost always to significant recipients.

It is almost impossible to select highlights, but a few of those which particularly stand out in my mind are Gerard Manley Hopkins' *Poems*, in its dust-wrapper and inscribed by Robert Bridges, extraordinary copies of works by T.S. Eliot and Robert Graves, the Romantic poets and W.B. Yeats. Booksellers are often asked which is the best or most expensive book they have sold. I almost always answer that it was Simon's copy of Keats' *Poems*. This was the full description:



Keats (John). *Poems.* Woodcut vignette of Spenser on the title-page. C. and J. Ollier, 1817. First Edition. Contemporary presentation diced green calf, sides with leafy, floral borders gilt, spine lettered in gilt and elaborately decorated in gilt and blind, marbled edges and end-papers, silk bookmark, preserved in cloth folding box, spine gilt. Half-title and preliminary blank. Binding very slightly rubbed at corners and joints, otherwise a very nice copy. Presentation Copy, inscribed on the title-page to the “Nymph of the downward smile and sidelong glance”: “G[eorgiana]. A. Wylie from her friends the Author and his Brother George” in George Keats’ hand. Hayward 231. £75,000

Georgiana Wylie married the poet’s brother George at the end of May, 1818.

The binding is virtually identical with that of the copies presented by the poet to his sister Fanny (now at the Houghton Library) and to Charles Cowden Clarke (Morgan Library) and similar to the copy of *Endymion* which the poet inscribed to Georgiana in his own hand on May 12th 1818. George and Georgiana sailed for America in June 1818, George becoming a successful owner of flour and lumber mills and later known as Louisville’s first millionaire. The brothers were very close and were in constant correspondence. George died in 1841 and his widow married a friend called John Jeffrey a year later. This copy passed to him when she died, then to his niece Virginia who married John H. Morgan from whom it was purchased by a New Jersey bookseller. It ended up with Lucius Wilmerding, the noted American collector, and was sold by his widow at auction.

Poems contains a poetic epistle and a sonnet addressed by Keats to his brother, the latter ending:

“But what, without the social thought of thee,
Would be the wonders of the sky and sea?”

and the former:

“Now I direct my eyes into the west,
Which at this moment is in sunbeams drest:
Why westward turn? ’Twas but to say adieu!
’Twas but to kiss my hand, dear George, to you!”

A pencilled note in the text explains that the poem headed * * * * on pages 36-39 was written by Keats for his brother to send to his sweetheart and another adds to the title of the Sonnet "To G.A.W." "ylie". The latter is the poem that begins: "Nymph of the downward smile and sidelong glance". However, it appears that the former was actually originally written as a valentine for George to send to Mary Frogley Woodhouse, although it has been asserted in numerous editions and biographies that it was written for his future wife. Certainly George made use of another poem, written by his brother for Ann and Caroline Mathew, in his courtship of Georgiana. In any case, we know that Keats greatly liked and admired Georgiana Wylie, writing to Bailey in 1818: "I had know[n] my sister in Law some time before she was my Sister and was very fond of her. I like her better and better – she is the most disinterested woman I ever knew – that is to say she goes beyond degree in it." Later in the same year he wrote to her: "I have a tenderness for you, and an admiration which I feel to be as great and more chaste than I can have for any woman in the world. You will mention Fanny [his sister] – her character is not formed, her identity does not press upon me as yours does. I hope from the bottom of my heart that I may one day feel as much for her as I do for you ..."

Finally, a catalogue which had pretty much no impact at all (although I still think it was an interesting idea). The family were away and I was inspired to create a catalogue based entirely on dust-jackets, and I worked on it flat out for several days.



That was the cover, which I thought rather ingenious and pleasing. My introduction:

"... or dust-wrappers as we tend to call them (avoided elsewhere because of potential confusion with the term "wrappers")...

It scarcely seems believable today that dust-wrappers were largely ignored by bibliographers and not especially prized by collectors (some claimed to despise them) as recently as is the case. Laurence Whistler, despairing of the time his brother Rex spent designing them, referred to them as "mayflies". Even now we feel that the history and beauty of the dust-wrapper remain undervalued in spite of the huge increase in commercial value we have seen.

This catalogue is an attempt to address this. It falls into three sections, beginning with books listed in alphabetical order of their dust-wrapper artists and designers, an arrangement we do not think we have seen before. Where possible we have added short details which we hope will place the artist in context and give a little

information about his or her other achievements. The second section deals with publishers and series, the third section lists books more conventionally by author and date.

We have tried to show examples of many kinds of dust-wrapper: the early and plain, the elegantly typographical, the highly ornate, the purely textual, the promotional and the lurid. Many however are included for no other reason than that we like them.

Dust-wrappers, like the first editions they adorn, tell us, of course, so much about the time when their books first appeared, as they progressed from the merely protective to the marketing tool. We see authors illustrating their own books, illustrations which are additional to those within a book, and works which may be deemed original to some considerable extent by artists that are simply not available in any other form. There is an example or two of the phenomenon of the fragile wraparound band, one of the few physical innovations in dust-wrapper history, but more importantly we believe we are illustrating a history of graphic design. Our understanding of the history of advertising, printing processes, graphic techniques, pricing and so on is deepened, not to mention bibliographical significance (although this has been largely ignored for the purposes of this catalogue). We note also the deliberate “family resemblance” of dust-wrappers of works by a certain author or in a particular publishing house series so as to make them immediately recognisable for what they are.

As far as we are aware there is no properly organised collection of books with their dust-wrappers as such (institutional libraries, even the deposit libraries, often store dust-wrappers separately and chaotically or not at all). Jan Tschichold, the typographer and book designer, once said that dust-wrappers should be thrown away as “mere publicity”. We hope this catalogue will go some way to proving him wrong.”

The experiment was a complete failure. As I recall I had a complimentary comment from just one customer, and not a single sale.

Julian Rota