

Chapter 6

Private pleasures and portable presses: do-it-yourself printers in the eighteenth-century

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In 1864 David Garden Berri published, in London, a slim volume entitled *The Art of Printing*.¹ Berri's book was not, however, intended for the edification of professional printers. Instead it aimed to popularize the typographic arts amongst the general public and sought to enable anyone, through a few simple instructions, to become their own printer. *The Art of Printing* was followed by several other such illustrated guides, which culminated with P. E. Raynor's popular *Printing for Amateurs* (1875).² Designed for the layman these volumes contained practical details on the machinery and materials required for printing together with descriptions of the processes necessary for their handling. That so many 'how to' books on printing were published and republished in such a short space of time demonstrates that, by the mid-nineteenth century, there was a marked demand for typographic instruction from a public interested in doing it themselves, and that printing had become one of the few mechanical trades in which the amateur 'played a significant part.'³

Throughout the long eighteenth century, historians had been trying to unravel the 'Nobel Art and Mystery of Printing' and were involved in a 'vast controversy over the cultural, social, and economic historiography' of the craft, which had been debated since the seventeenth century.⁴ It is perhaps this discussion, and the literature it inspired, that helped ignite the interest of the layman.

The earliest efforts to untangle the history of printing include John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments 1563-1684*,⁵ and Richard Atkyns's, *The original and growth of*

¹ David Garden Berri, *The Art of Printing* (London: 1864).

² Jabez Francis, *Printing at home: with full instructions of amateurs* (Rochford: 1870); *How to Print* (London: 1875); P. E. Raynor, *Printing for Amateurs: a practical guide to the art of printing, illustrated* (London: 1876).

³ Roderick Cave, *The Private Press* (London: 1971).

⁴ Adrian Johns, *The nature of the book: print and knowledge in the making* (Chicago, IL: 1998), 324-79.

⁵ John Foxe, 'The benefit and invention of printing', *The unabridged Acts and Monuments of John Foxe* (London: 1837), iii, 718.

printing (1664). However, the boldest and most extensive attempt to describe the techniques of the craft and to write a purposeful history was Joseph Moxon's *Mechanick exercises on the whole art of printing* (1683). Moxon produced a detailed account of contemporary practices in typefounding, composition and presswork. It was an instruction manual of the techniques used by the seventeenth-century printer and a publication that may have informed later amateur printers, although the level of detail probably deterred most laymen. In the early eighteenth century, around the time of the third centenary of the invention of printing, several important works on the topic were published. Burges's pamphlet, *Some observations on the use and origin of the noble art and mystery of printing* (1701) was the first of several histories issued by working printers during the eighteenth century to publicise their trade, often in conjunction with manuals or type specimens.⁶ This was followed by Samuel Palmer's *General History of Printing* (1732); Conyers Middleton's *Dissertation Concerning the Origin of Printing in England* (1735); Prosper Marchand's *Histoire de l'Origine et des Premiers Progrès de l'Imprimerie* (1740); and Joseph Ames's *Typographical Antiquities* (1749). More widely available was the anonymous article: 'An essay on the original use and excellency of the noble art and mystery of printing', which appeared in the *London Weekly Register*, 9 September 1732. Printers' manuals continued to be issued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: many were derived, to a greater or lesser extent, from the *Mechanick exercises*. The first of Moxon's successors was James Watson, a Scottish printer, whose publication, *The history of the art of printing* [1713], contained an account of the invention and progress of printing, complete with the names of famous printers, the places of their birth, and the works they printed. Watson's *History* was followed by John Smith's *Printers' grammar* [1755], which 'exhibited and examined and explained the superficies, gradation and properties of the different sorts and sizes of metal types cut by letter foundries.' Smith dealt exclusively with compositors' work, and his detailed descriptions indicate this book drew largely upon his own experiences. Another notable printing manual was Philip Luckombe's *Concise history of the origin and progress of printing* [1770] issued in two parts: part one provided a concise account of printing from its invention up to the eighteenth century, and presented specimens of printing types of all sizes and languages, musical types,

⁶ David Stoker, 'Observations on printing, 1701: a reconstruction of the text', *The Library* (June 2005), xi, ii, 161-77.

flowers and ornaments; whilst part two was a practical manual of printing.⁷ There was a growing body of literature, therefore, to inform and encourage the aspiring amateur printer.

While these publications provide insight into the evolving understanding of print's past and a window on the working practices of eighteenth-century printers, the language used to describe the craft is equally revealing and may have influenced the aspiring amateur printer. Authors elevated printing to a 'Noble' art: a dignified, moral and honourable craft, suitable for kings and princes. More than that, they bestowed it with magical qualities: many writers described the process as 'Divine' or a 'Mystery.' The dirty, dangerous, corporeal craft of printing was elevated to an enigmatic and spiritual practice. The Master Printer is described as the 'soul of printing' and his work is executing the 'word of God.' While the 'Divine Art' was attributed with supernatural qualities it was also credited with revolutionising superstitions, as having useful, practical, worldly attributes and giving impetus to science. Moxon advertised printing as equal to architecture as a 'mathematical science' worthy of the attention of his fellow members of the Royal Society and which required logic and reasoning to perform.⁸ Printing, therefore, was aligned in the public mind with nobility, God and the new religion of science: when 'selling' print to the public the industry writers had covered all bases. It is, perhaps, this wide-ranging, all-encompassing appeal which was promoted by the contemporary literature, that encouraged the general public to engage with printing, one of 'the three great elements of modern civilization.'⁹

The rise of the amateur printer

While the mid-nineteenth century represents a zenith in popular engagement with the typographic arts, amateur interest had, however, started in the early eighteenth century when fashionable people—royalty, gentry and men of letters—first took up printing as a hobby. That anyone with the interest, and the

⁷ Caroline Archer, 'A brief history of type historians', *Graphic design reader*, ed Triggs and Atzmon, (London: 2019), 323-31.

⁸ Moxon, *Mechanic Exercises* (1683), l + li.

⁹ Thomas Carlyle, 'The three great elements of modern civilization, Gunpowder, Printing, and the Protestant Religion' in Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, I 'The State of German Literature'*, (London: 1839).

financial wherewithal, had the freedom to engage with the craft so early in the century may seem surprising. It was, after all, only a few short years since state control over printing was lifted in England in 1695—control that had ensured no press was erected outside London, except in the University towns of Oxford and Cambridge and the city of York. These restrictions not only regulated the number of presses and printers, but also determined what could, and could not, be produced.¹⁰ Parliament's Acts and Decrees were a response to a long-held, ingrained fear that the liberty to print was a threat to society, a challenge to crown and state, and a danger to the Church and public morality. Their lapse was followed by an expansion in printing not simply for professional gain but also for private pleasure.¹¹

But it was not just Acts of Parliament that hampered amateur engagement with printing: so too did the trade's rigid structure and organisation. From the time William Caxton (1422-91) introduced printing into England in 1476 no one was able set up as a Master Printer without having served a seven-year apprenticeship. Master Printers defended their privileges and protected their skills,¹² and it was only they, assisted perhaps by a journeymen or apprentice, who could issue printed material.¹³ The terms of apprenticeship were enshrined in law and regulated by the Statute of Artificers (1563 and 1601), which authorised and made national that which had been usual practice.¹⁴ Just as parliament had imposed restrictions on the printing trade, so the trade itself enforced tight controls on who could join it, and how it operated. The controlled became the controller and as a consequence the printing trade was almost impenetrable to those outsiders who wished to engage with the craft.

In the eighteenth century, however, non-indentured individuals began to infiltrate the craft and to print for pleasure and sometimes for profit. In doing so they blurred the demarcations between the professional and the layman and, in

¹⁰ Star Chamber Decree (1637); 'Act for preventing abuses in printing seditious, treasonable and unlicensed books and pamphlets, printing and printing presses' (1662). Raymond Astbury, 'The renewal of the licensing act in 1693 and its lapse in 1695', *The Library* (December 1978), xxxiii, iv, 298-322.

¹¹ Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the eighteenth century* (Abingdon: 2011).

¹² David Jury, *Graphic Design before graphic designers: the printer as designer and craftsman, 1700-1914*. (London: 2012), 15-16.

¹³ T. A. Skingsley, 'Technical training and education in the English printing industry', *Printing Historical Society Journal* (London: 1978/9), xiii, 1-25.

¹⁴ Skingsley, 'Technical training and education in the English printing industry' (1978/9).

some instances, challenged the Master Printer at his own game. This chapter considers how printing, one of the most highly skilled, closely policed and most threatening of all the trades became, during the eighteenth century, a craft widely pursued by amateurs.¹⁵ It considers the changing complexion of the lay printer; reflects on what they produced, their motivations for so doing, and the intellectual and technological environment that enabled the emergence of the amateur printer at this time.

Gentlemen and Lady printers

Defining the 'amateur printer' in the eighteenth century is problematic, not least because the concept of 'amateur' came late to the Georgian way of thinking. Samuel Johnson's (1709-84) *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), the most influential and comprehensive lexicon of the period had no entry for the word. It was not until 1784 that 'amateur' first entered the English language, when it was used to describe someone who simply 'has a taste for some art, study, or pursuit, but does not practice it'. By 1786 the meaning had evolved and was applied to 'one who cultivates and participates (in something) but does not pursue it professionally or with an eye to'.¹⁶ By the end of the century 'amateur' was often used disparagingly to describe someone who was a 'dabbler' or 'dilettante'.¹⁷ In contrast, a 'professional' was someone who 'does it for a living'. The change in nomenclature was a reflection of the increase in professional specialisations that emerged during the Enlightenment. In the printing trade this led to the division of labour and the establishment of laws that enshrined who could and could not practice the craft. This inevitably forced a distinction between the professional and amateur printer and increased the emphasis on exclusion over inclusion and segregation over integration.

Most lay-printers of the early eighteenth-century can best be described as 'gentleman amateurs' a phenomenon that first emerged in the seventeenth century.¹⁸ They were invariably wealthy, noble and educated. Although they had a 'taste' for printing they were primarily interested in the products of the press rather than contributing to its technological advancement or aesthetic progress.

¹⁵ Cave, *The Private Press* (1971).

¹⁶ *Etymology Dictionary*, Online, etymonline.com, accessed 28 December 2018.

¹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Online, oed.com, accessed 28 December 2018.

¹⁸ Robert Stebbins, *Amateurs, professionals and serious leisure* (Montreal: 1992).

Nor were they motivated by financial gain. Instead, 'gentleman printers' took advantage of the new era of comparative press freedom in order to render into print poems and prose penned by their own hands or that of their acquaintances. To do so they employed the skills of professional compositors and printers to execute the work. Eighteenth-century amateur printers saw themselves as 'publishers' rather than artisans and as such they were the originators the 'private press' movement. Probably the best known of these early 'gentlemen printers', was the historian, collector, social commentator and man of letters, Horace Walpole (1717-97).¹⁹ Walpole established his Strawberry Hill Press at Twickenham, Surrey, in 1757 where he employed a single man to act as compositor, pressman and warehouseman.²⁰ The first book issued from Strawberry Hill was an edition of *The Odes* by Walpole's friend the poet Thomas Gray. This was followed by titles of his own creation such as *Mysterious mother* (1768) a blank verse drama and an *Essay of modern gardening* (1785). The English bibliographer and genealogist Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges (1762-1837) recruited the services of the printers John Johnson and John Warwick to produce his many volumes of literature at his Lee Priory Press, Kent.²¹ Moreover, the English radical, journalist, and politician John Wilkes (1725-97) briefly kept, in 1763, a large-scale printing office in his house in Great George Street, London, where he had two presses and eight men working for him.²² So large was the set-up that, in order to accommodate the presses, Wilkes had to 'call in carpenters to enlarge the hall'.²³

Therein lay the greatest stumbling block for most 'amateur' printers of the eighteenth century: access to space sufficiently commodious to accommodate all the equipment necessary for production. Printing machinery was prohibitively large and cumbersome. The average eighteenth-century wooden press needed seven square feet of floor space and a frame of type holding two cases required

¹⁹ Michael Snodin, Cynthia E Roman, *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill* (London & New Haven, CT: 2009).

²⁰ James Mosley, 'The press in the parlour: some notes on the amateur printer and his equipment', *The Black Art* 2, Spring 1962, i, 1-15.

²¹ K. A. Manley, 'Brydges, Sir (Samuel) Egerton, first baronet, styled thirteenth Baron Chandos', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Online. doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/3809, accessed 14 June 2019.

²² P. Thomas, 'Wilkes, John (1725–1797), politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 4 Dec. 2019, from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-29410>.

²³ Arthur H. Cash, *John Wilkes: the scandalous father of civil liberty*. (London & New Haven, CT: 2006).

five-and-a-half by four-and-half feet of floor space.²⁴ Solid foundations coupled with an even and horizontal floor were also needed. In addition, the roof and walls had to be strong and firm so that the presses could be fastened with braces overhead and on all sides in order to stabilise them. Another necessity was luminosity, but the window tax meant letting in light cost money.²⁵ In addition, the methods and materials of printing meant there was 'ever-present danger from a lethal combination of paper, oil, turpentine and candle-light' and therefore inappropriate for most homes.²⁶ These difficulties combined to make printing viable only for those with large houses and deep pockets who could employ experienced printers to help them navigate the pitfalls of the craft.²⁷ Although they did not participate in the hands-on, practical elements of printing, 'gentlemen printers' evidently took their typographic leisure time very seriously because the installation of a domestic printing house required a high degree of commitment, much investment and a great deal of determination.

To circumvent the problems some enthusiasts commissioned one of the scaled-down presses designed specifically for amateurs wishing to participate in the craft of printing but who did not want to pursue it professionally. The London engraver and etcher, John Sutter, first advertised his portable press in 1769 for the use of 'noblemen, gentlemen and ladies curious in printing.' Sutter's anticipated market is clearly defined: his customers were wealthy individuals who wished to participate in printing for leisure rather than financial gain. Sutter had competition. John Brown first manufactured a 'Portable-Printing Press' in around 1770 and used it to print his own writings from Fair-Street, Horsly-Down, Southwark.²⁸ It may be assumed that Sutter and Brown's presses were made to order, and the fact that two manufacturers of portable presses emerged within a short space of time, indicates there was a market for such items. Small-scale printing presses had great appeal: firstly, because they enabled the amateur to engage with printing at home, and secondly because the very art of miniaturisation was a fascination in itself. In the eighteenth century

²⁴ Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises: or the doctrine of handy-works applied to the art of printing* (London: 1683), 16-17.

²⁵ Wallace E. Oates and Robert M. Schwab, 'The Window Tax: a case study in excess burden', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* xxix, i, Winter 2015, 163-80.

²⁶ Michael Twyman, *Printing, 1770-1970* (London: 1998), 8.

²⁷ Mosley, 'The press in the parlour' (1963), 1-15.

²⁸ P. E. Raynor, 'Printing for Amateurs'. *Printing Historical Society Journal* (London: 1994), xxiii, 5-6.

advances in technology and the advent of precision tools certainly assisted the vogue for scaled-down machinery and Sutter and Brown's undersized, portable presses became adverts for the skill and craftsmanship of the joiners and smiths who made them.²⁹

Fashionable interest in scaled-down presses started with royalty and filtered through the social ranks. The Duke of Cumberland and his sisters printed on a portable press at St James's Palace as early as 1713.³⁰ The occasion merited a report in *The Gentleman Magazine*:

A printing-press and cases for composing were put up at St James's House for their Majesties to see the noble art of printing. The two youngest princesses compose'd their names, under the direction of Mr Palmer, a printer in this city. And R. H. the Duke wrought at one of the cases for the press a short piece of his own writing, call'd *The Laws of the Doge Hare*.³¹

There is no indication whether this was a permanent or temporary set-up, if the occasion was repeated or whether the press had been specially made for the event—although it most likely had. The announcement does, however, reveal that royalty were as susceptible as the next person to the thrill of seeing their names in print and having the products of their pens 'immortalised' by the printing press. It also shows that the 'noble art' of printing for pleasure was not confined to princes alone: princesses too could try their hand at the compositor's craft. It was a tradition that the elderly Queen Charlotte (1744-1818) continued when, in 1809, she installed a private press at Frogmore Lodge, Windsor, from where she was assisted in her productions by the printer Edward Harding. The only known publications issued by the Queen's press were five sets of *Historical and Chronological Cards*; two volumes of *Translations from the German* inscribed 'The gift of the queen to her beloved daughters—Charlotte-Augusta, Matilda, Augusta-Sophia, Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia'; and *Miscellaneous Poems*. Only thirty copies of each work were printed before the

²⁹ Mosley, 'The press in the parlour' (1963).

³⁰ James Moran, *Printing presses: history and development from the fifteenth century to modern times* (London: 1972).

³¹ *The Gentleman Magazine* 15 February 1713, i, 79.

press ceased.³² While printing for commerce was almost exclusively the preserve of men, printing for pleasure straddled the sexes.

Nor was it just English royalty who took an interest in the typographer's craft. The French King Louis XIV (1638-1715) reputedly printed on a scaled-down press, and the family's involvement with amateur typographics appears to have continued throughout the century. In 1723 a small-scale printing office was set-up in the Tuileries Palace for eight-year-old Louis XV (1715-74) who was taught by the Parisian typefounder and printer Jacques Collombat (1668-1744); and Louis XVI (1754-93) was also interested in the products of the press and had a scaled-down printing press installed in the Louvre Palace.³³ Once French royalty involved themselves with printing it was only a matter of time before it captured the interest of other members of the Court. For example, the director general of the King's buildings, the Marquis de Marigny (1727-81), acquired an etching press, a printing press and all its parts, and a *press d'imprimerie en taille douce* (intaglio press),³⁴ which he stored in a 'laboratory' at his home in Bercy. Known as his 'capharnaum'—literally a place of confusion or odd storage—the laboratory was filled with an extraordinary collection of scientific instruments and miniaturised machines, including a tiny press for printing an alphabet which was displayed alongside a bundle of English pencils, a mahogany writing desk, seals and sealing wax.³⁵ Marigny's laboratory approach to collecting meant his assemblage of machinery was not simply a tangible token of his wealth and intelligence. By displaying his presses alongside instruments of writing he was trying to curate and make sense of the varied tools of contemporary communication in a systematic way. There is no evidence of what, if anything, Marigny produced on his presses, but undoubtedly his curiosity was for the science, technology and mechanics of printing rather than its aesthetics. By contrast, Marigny's sister, Jeanne Antoinette Poisson (1721-64), better known as Madame de Pompadour, was concerned with the artistic potential of the craft. While living at Versailles, Pompadour, the influential mistress of Louis XV, was taught the art of etching by the French painter, François Boucher (1703-70).

³² Charles Henry Timperley, *A Dictionary of Printers and Printing* (London: 1839), 845.

³³ Moran, *Printing presses* (1972).

³⁴ A process by which an image is incised into a surface of a zinc or copper plate and the incised line or sunken area holds the ink.

³⁵ Alden R Gordon, *The house and collection of the Marquis de Marigny*, edited Carolyne Ayçaguer-Ron (ed.) (Los Angeles, CA: 2003), 104-22.

Under Boucher's guidance she created fifty-two engravings of his drawings.³⁶ Pompadour also developed an interest in typographic printing having watched the craftsmen of the Imprimerie Royale set the type and print an edition of Pierre Corneille's *Rodogune: Princess des Parthes* (1760).³⁷ In her apartment at Versailles Pompadour kept a scaled-down wooden press on which, it may be presumed, she printed works of her own composition.³⁸

The Italian poet and dramatist Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803) was a staunch opponent of tyranny, supported American Independence, hailed the fall of the Bastille and looked to England for the political liberty that became his ideal. He was also an amateur printer of works of his own creation. In a letter he wrote in 1786 from Florence to his friend the Abate Tommason Caluso, Alfieri declares: 'I enclose for you, so that you may see my ability, a sonnet printed by me with a little portable printing press of mine, with which I can print just fourteen lines and no more.'³⁹ It is interesting to note that four of Alfieri's works (although not those he printed himself) bear the imprint *dalla Tipographia di Kehl, co' caratteri di Baskerville* (1786, 1795, 1800, 1809) which indicate they were composed using the type of England's most influential amateur printer, John Baskerville (1707-75).⁴⁰ After his death, Baskerville's type became associated with ideas of reason, liberty and progress and was adopted by the French Revolution and used to produce revolutionary tracts and the *Gazette Nationale ou Le Moniteur Universel*. By choosing Baskerville's type, Alfieri was allying himself with a political cause and making a radical statement, not simply by what he wrote but through the typographical representation of those words. Alfieri was a particularly well-informed amateur printer, alert to the power of print, cognisant of the leading exponents in the field and with a particularly acute awareness of the subliminal significance of a typeface.

It was perhaps natural that at a time when the Kings of England and France had taken up printing, that it should become 'a polite study for humble patrons and

³⁶ Adhemar, Jean. *Graphic art of the eighteenth century* (London: 1964), 43, 106, 108, 113.

³⁷ Margaret Trouncer, *The Pompadour* (London: 1937), 218.

³⁸ Perrin Stein, Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, Eunice Williams and Kelsey Brosnan, *Fragonard: drawing triumphant* (London & New Haven, CT: 2016).

³⁹ Giuseppe Mazzatinti, *Lettere edite ed inedite di Vittorio Alfieri a cura di Guiseppe Mazzatinti* (Turin: 1890), 149.

⁴⁰ Josiah Henry Benton, *John Baskerville: typefounder and printer 1706-75* (Boston: 1914), 52.

people of more leisure.’⁴¹ Certainly fashionable patronage of the printing press expedited wider public involvement with the craft, and as interest in printing filtered through society so some amateur printers began using their portable presses for more practical purposes. For example, when James Boswell (1740-95) visited Lichfield with Dr Samuel Johnson in 1776, they went to see the museum of Richard Green, a local apothecary and relation of Johnson’s, who had ‘all the articles accurately arranged with their names upon labels, printed at his own little press.’⁴² Scaled-down presses were particularly well adapted to such small works, and assisted in the scientific organisation, cataloguing and displaying of the world. The printing press certainly gave impetus to art, science and commerce and while amateurs printed their own writing, businessmen printed labels, cards, lists, invoices, and non-business people could print sermons, bookplates, and newsletters for their own amusement.⁴³

There is no record of how many custom-made, scaled-down, portable presses were built, but their adoption was geographically widespread and the use to which they were put was varied. Philip Gaskell notes several examples in his census of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century wooden presses.⁴⁴ Peter the Great had a travelling press built in 1723, which could be conveniently packed in a wagon, but required placing on a raised surface for working. It is unclear whether the Emperor’s travelling press was for work or pleasure, but a similar portable press was built for a Monsieur R. Bonchat of Brussels. In the Musée de Lille, France there is an example of eighteenth-century miniature wooden common press that appears to have been used in processions: whether for entertainment or for printing indulgences or other religious ephemera is not known.

By the nineteenth century printing began to be sold to the middle-classes as an affordable, satisfying and intellectually profitable pastime: ‘there is probably no art or science calculated to afford so much gratification to amateurs as printing, inasmuch as it is a valuable handmaid or assistant to all other arts.’⁴⁵ There were

⁴¹ Moxon. *Mechanick Exercises*, lii.

⁴² Olga Baird, ‘Samuel Johnson and Green’s Museum’, *Revolutionary Players*, Online, revolutionaryplayers.org.uk/samuel-johnson-and-greenes-museum, accessed 21 July 2019.

⁴³ Berri, *The art of printing* (1865).

⁴⁴ Philip Gaskell, ‘A census of wooden presses’ *Journal of the Printing Historical Society*: (1970), vi, 1-32.

⁴⁵ Francis, *Printing at home*(1870).

reassurances from the manufacturers of portable presses that printing was appropriate for the domestic setting; they misleadingly claimed that it was clean and created no mess; that it made no noise to disturb the domestic life and it was suitable for both parlour and drawing room. The public was sold a scrubbed-up socially acceptable version of printing which was quite different to its noisy, dirty and messy commercial counterpart. As a result, a vogue for printing for pleasure broke out among middle-class wives and daughters who started to use their leisure time to print calling cards, invitations for parties, or even small books of prose and verse of their own composition. Small engineering firms soon awoke to the existence of this new and potentially lucrative pool of budding amateur printers. So large was the market that by the mid-nineteenth century Holtzapffel & Co.—tool and lathe makers, London—were designing, manufacturing and commercially retailing ‘toy’ printing presses specifically for the amateur. By 1846 Holtzapffel had issued the third, and greatly enlarged, edition of its ‘toy press’ manual, which suggests it had built up a flourishing business and that respectable parlours across middle England were echoing to the clatter of amateur presses.⁴⁶

But it was not only wives and daughters who were printing in the parlour: manufacturers were keen to point out that the typographic arts would delight all members of the family:

either parent may write an essay, poem, or a note to friends at a distance, a young lady daughter may “compose” it – i.e. put it in type and “proof” it; the proof may be read by all and corrected, it is then “made ready” and one rolls the “forme” or type, while another prints at the press.⁴⁷

Printing, it seems, encouraged family cohesion.

As anyone who has ever set and printed a line of type knows it gives a real sense of satisfaction and excitement but motives for printing were probably many and various. For some middle-class amateur printers, scaled-down printing presses were simply curiosities or toys. For others, however, printing at home may have provided an intellectual experience and they printed in order to make education more attractive, either for themselves or for their children. Composing and

⁴⁶ Charles Holtzapffel, *Printing apparatus for the use of amateurs: containing full and practical instructions for the use of Cowper's parlour printing press* (London: 1846).

⁴⁷ Francis, *Printing at home* (1870).

printing a body of text perhaps gave the user an intimate acquaintance with classical literature, a detailed understanding of the words they were setting, and an appreciation of what could be learnt from the process of printing something. It also gave women printers liberty of expression, freedom of communication, a chance to render in metal type the thoughts of their pen, and the opportunity to engage with a craft from which they were, generally, barred: that which was deemed unacceptable as a profession was acceptable as a female pastime.

By the mid-nineteenth century, printing for pleasure was firmly established as a middle-class hobby, much to 'the disgust of the printing trade.'⁴⁸ The trade not only regretted the loss of business but was, perhaps, also threatened by the idea of women taking up printing: printers had, after all, long striven to keep women away from the presses and out of the composing room. There were also concerns that the 'untrained' were taking away work from the 'trained' and were undermining their skills. Just as the state had once seen the printers as a threat to stability, so the printers saw the 'amateur' printer as a threat to their integrity, livelihood and status.

Printing for profit

But it was not only the wives and daughters of middle England who posed a threat to professional printers. In Birmingham, in the mid-eighteenth century, there emerged an amateur printer who challenged the printing trade locally, nationally and internationally, who blurred the boundaries between the layman and professional, and challenged the Master Printers at their own game.

John Baskerville (1707-75) is perhaps the most famous, influential and historically important of all English printers of the eighteenth century.⁴⁹ Known as the 'complete printer', Baskerville considered all aspects of the craft by reappraising the design of letters, experimenting with casting and setting type, improving the construction of the printing press, developing a new kind of paper and refining the quality of inks. Baskerville did much to enhance the printing and

⁴⁸ Mosley, 'The press in the parlour' (1963).

⁴⁹ James Mosley, 'John Baskerville', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Online, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/1624, accessed 1 July 2019; Caroline Archer-Parré, 'Printing and the Printed Word', *Birmingham – the workshop of the world*, eds. Carl Chinn and Malcolm Dick (Liverpool: 2016).

publishing industries of his day in Britain and beyond. The volumes he issued—from an edition of Virgil’s poetry in 1757 to his final publication, William Hunter’s magisterial, *The anatomy of the gravid uterus* of 1774—are recognised by printing historians, librarians and bibliophiles as masterpieces of the art and technology of book design and production.⁵⁰ It is widely agreed that ‘no other English printer made such great contribution in so many ways to the development of the craft.’⁵¹ And yet, he was an amateur.

How Baskerville became interested in printing is unknown. There was little practical reading matter for the eighteenth-century lay-printer, but it may be that Baskerville read the twenty-page pamphlet, ‘Some observations on the use and origin of the noble art and mystery of printing’, written and printed by Francis Burges in 1701.⁵² One of the earliest published accounts of the subject in English this little publication demonstrates the current state of knowledge of, and prevalent attitudes towards the history of printing at the time of fundamental change to the regulation of the trade in England. Alternatively the more widely available, but anonymous, article ‘An essay on the original use and excellency of the noble art and mystery of printing’ which appeared in the *London Weekly Register*, 9 September 1732, may also have roused Baskerville’s interest in the typographer’s craft.

During his lifetime Baskerville was regarded as an amateur by the printing trade, for which he was widely vilified. Indeed, Baskerville bore many of the fundamental characteristics of a layman. With no formal background in the typographic arts, and not having served an apprenticeship, the English printing trade regarded him as a typographic interloper. His wealth marked him as a ‘gentleman amateur’ and allowed him to indulge his taste for printing and, in common with other ‘gentleman amateurs’, money permitted Baskerville to purchase the services of professional printers: local man John Handy was his punch-cutter and Robert Martin his pressman to assist with his typographic undertakings. It is here, however, that his similarity with other amateur printers ends.

⁵⁰ Caroline Archer-Parré and Malcolm Dick, ‘Introduction’, *John Baskerville: art and industry of the Enlightenment* (Liverpool: 2017).

⁵¹ F. E. Pardoe, *John Baskerville of Birmingham: letter-founder and printer* (London: 1975).

⁵² John Dreyfus, ‘Baskerville’s method of printing,’ *Signature* vol 12, New Series (1951), xii, 44-49.

Baskerville was not a 'gentleman' by birth; rather he rose through the social ranks as a result of his own endeavours. He was a self-made man, an artisan from a humble background and with first-hand experience of manufacturing. He was in his late forties before he turned his attention to printing, having earned an early fortune from his japanning business.⁵³ Nor was he simply a bystander in his printing workshop but laboured alongside those he employed. Baskerville was unusual among eighteenth-century lay-printers in that he actively cultivated and participated in all aspects of the craft including design type, punch cutting, printing and binding. The extent of his printing house, coupled with the volume of his output, the unassailable quality of his work, and his desire to contribute to the progress of the craft indicated he was far from a dilettante. Unlike 'gentlemen amateurs' who used their presses for vanity publishing, Baskerville printed not his own words but chose to produce great literature already in the public domain, which would showcase his press to greatest effect. As he wrote: 'It is not my desire to print many books; but such only as are *books of Consequence, of intrinsic merit or Established Reputation.*'⁵⁴ Unlike most amateurs, Baskerville was motivated to print in order to contribute to the progress of the craft. This is clearly expressed in his 'Preface' to his own printing of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1758):

Having been an early admirer of the beauty of Letters, I became insensibly desirous of contributing to the perfection of them. I formed to myself ideas of greater accuracy than had yet appeared, and have endeavored to produce a set of types according to what I conceive to be their true proportions.⁵⁵

Baskerville's mistake, as far as the trade was concerned, was to turn his interest into a profession, to make money from it, and beat the professionals at their own game. Baskerville was indisputably a serious printer but also 'an outsider'⁵⁶ and much of the disapprobation he suffered during his lifetime was because many English Master Printers felt his typographic talents threatened their own position and undermined their skills.⁵⁷ Printing has always been 'a craft bound

⁵³ Yvonne Jones, *Japanned papier mâché and tinware c. 1740-1940* (Woodbridge: 2012); George Demidowicz, 'Place, home and workplace: Baskerville's birthplace and buildings', *John Baskerville: art and industry of the Enlightenment* (Liverpool: 2017), 42-70.

⁵⁴ John Baskerville, 'Foreword', *Paradise Lost* (Birmingham: 1758).

⁵⁵ Baskerville, 'Foreword' (1758).

⁵⁶ Pardoe, *John Baskerville* (1975), xiii.

⁵⁷ Benton, *John Baskerville* (1914), 12-19.

up in its own traditions and innovators have never been popular.’⁵⁸ Baskerville was undoubtedly an innovator but he was also, in the eyes of the trade, technically an amateur, an outsider and a provincial: it is hardly surprising, therefore, that his contemporaries disapproved of him, his type, and his printing.

Printing in public

By the eighteenth century print was a common commodity: books for the wealthy, chapbooks for the poor and newspapers for all. Print had also begun to penetrate business, entertainment and travel—and there was an expansion of printed ephemera, which included advertisements, tickets, printed forms and dozens of other items.⁵⁹ Printing had become a part of everyday life; but how print happened was less common knowledge and the operations of the printing press became a curiosity for the layman. For those interested to know more, but were unable to afford their own press, there were opportunities to see printing in action, and even have a go themselves. For example, residents of Birmingham in 1763 were treated to the following spectacle:

TO BE SEEN: From Ten o'clock in the Morning till One, and from Two till Seven in the Afternoon, at the Black-Lion, in the Bull-Ring, Birmingham. The most curious piece of machinery that ever was exhibited to the Public in this or any other Country, which gives the most entire Satisfaction to all Gentlemen and Ladies who have ever seen it; the Company are sent off equally amazed and pleased, nor are the greatest Mechanics and acute Philosophers less surprised, or at all able to account for the Execution of what they see performed; nor was this Machine, or any Thing like it, ever seen any where else, as this Town is the first Place of its being exhibited. Whoever will seriously declare the Curiosity not worth their Money, shall have it returned. The Price to Servants and Children 6d. To Gentlemen and Ladies what they please. His Stay in Town will be but short. It represents a Printer at Work, who prints, at Desire, a City, Town or Persons Name. N.B. All the Materials, and several other Machineries, to be sold by the inventor, WILLIAM JUXON, he being uncapable (*sic.*) of Travelling.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Pardoe, *John Baskerville* (1975), xiv.

⁵⁹ John Feather, ‘British publishing in the eighteenth century: a preliminary subject analysis’, *The Library*, Volume s6-VIII, Issue 1, (March 1986). . 32–46.

⁶⁰ *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 2 May 1763.

There appears to be no extant evidence of either this little press or its inventor, William Juxon. However, the advertisement makes clear that while the model was intended to be a public spectacle it was also instructional, selling both the concept of printing and the actual machine. Seeing printing machines in action, the inquisitive public also wanted to practically engage with the craft. To satisfy their curiosity some printing houses, either for money or a glass of beer, opened their doors to visitors. Tourists to Oxford could pay to visit the University Press and watch its printers and compositors in action. Visitors to eighteenth-century Scarborough could also see the local printer at work as Thomas Gent (1693-1778) records in his memoirs. Gent and his nephew, Arthur Clarke, opened the doors of their printing house to paying visitors and ‘the gentry from the Spa used to visit us, to have their names, and see the playhouse bills and other works printed.’⁶¹ To commemorate the visits the printers usually produced keepsakes and guests were allowed to pull the bar of the press. Many of the mementoes carried the words ‘The Noble Art and Mystery of Printing’ along with the line ‘Printed with his (or Her) Own Hand’ followed by the name of the visitor.⁶² Going to see the local printing press at work was an amusing and informative holiday diversion for the visitors, and it provided welcome additional income for enterprising printers.

Some printers, aware of the entertainment value of the craft and the additional income to be made, took their presses out to the public and travelled with their machines to exhibit them at pageants, festivals and ‘Frost Fairs’. For example, in Truro on 26 May 1856 the end of the Crimean War was commemorated with day’s holiday. Amongst the flags, flowers and fireworks a pageant, 700 yards in length, moved through the streets. It comprised masters and workmen from different trades in vehicles of various kinds, bearing tools of their craft.

Foremost among them was a printer, Mr Endean, who:

exhibited an Albion Press at work, in a wagon, decorated with flags bearing suitable mottoes; and at the sides, between the flags were displayed copies of the *Times* and *Cornwall Gazette* newspapers. The Press was engaged, during the procession, in printing for immediate

⁶¹ *The Life of Mr Thomas Gent, printer, of York; written by himself* (London: 1832; reissued New York: 1974), 182-3.

⁶² B. J. McMullin, ‘An excursion into printed keepsakes: III: “Printed on the Thames being frozen,”’ *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin* (1987), xi, iv, 157-68.

distribution among the people copies of a leaflet bearing the words: —

PEACE WITH RUSSIA. CELEBRATED AT TRURO, MAY 29, 1856.⁶³

In addition, appropriate lines from Shakespeare, Burns and the Bible were printed and distributed as a permanent record of the day—typographic souvenirs that would survive long after the flowers had faded and the fireworks fizzled out.

‘Frost Fairs’ provided another popular outing for printing presses.⁶⁴ During the eighteenth century the River Thames froze over several times (1684-85; 1739-40; 1788-9; 1813-14) and games, shows, and stalls of all kinds were held on its frozen surface. Scaled-down printing presses were regularly exhibited at the fairs and keepsakes were produced to memorialize the occasion.⁶⁵ Most carried the customary legend ‘The Noble Art and Mystery of Printing’ alongside the verse: ‘All you that walk upon the Thames. Step in this booth and print your names; and lay it by that ages yet to come, may see what things upon the ice were done.’ While the printer probably set the type in advance, the pulling of the proof was left to the visitor, thereby giving them first-hand experience of the printer’s craft. John Evelyn (1620-1706), the writer, gardener and diarist, described the interest caused by the presses in his diary entry for 24 January 1684:

The frost continuing more and more severe, the Thames before London was still planted with booths in formal streets, all sorts of trades and shops furnish’d and full of commodities, even to a printing press, where the people and ladyes took a fancy to have their names printed, and the day and the year set down when printed on the Thames; the humour took so universally, that ’twas estimated the printer gain’d £5 a day for printing a line only, at sixpence a time, besides what he got by ballads &c.⁶⁶

The Thames Frost Fair was visited by commoners and royalty alike: King Charles II, the Duke of York; the Queen; Mary Modena, wife of the Duke of York; Princess Anne and her husband, Prince George of Denmark each had their names printed

⁶³ *Truro Gazette*, 29 May 1859.

⁶⁴ James Bowen, ‘Shrewsbury Frost Fairs’, *Midland History* (2018), xxxiii, i, 43-61.

⁶⁵ James Moran, ‘Printing on the Thames’, *The Black Art* (London: 1963), ii, iii, 67-70.

⁶⁶ *Memoirs Illustrative of the Life and Writings of John Evelyn* (London: 1819), 655.

by G. Croom (1643-1713) on a quarto sheet of Dutch paper.⁶⁷ When Mr John Cross, aged 6, visited the Frost Fair printer he was delighted to find 'You may print your name, tho' cannot write.'⁶⁸ For those without recourse to the pen or the skills to form their letters, printing gave them the power to render their names in print: where the nib failed the printing press succeeded.

Conclusion

The private pleasures and portable presses of eighteenth-century do-it-yourself printers became popular because printing at home was a classless and egalitarian pastime. It could be undertaken by the young and the old, and by men and women alike—in stark contrast to trade printing which was riddled with structures and traditions and less than permissive of women. Printing for pleasure gave liberty to the amateur to engage with a closed craft, and express themselves in a new era of comparative press freedom. This liberty gave the amateur printer autonomy over their own words because their texts were unmediated either by printer, publisher or the State. There was a sense that by rendering their compositions into print their thoughts were somehow protected from the ravishing of time and preserved for posterity in a way not possible with the pen. While the pen may have been cheaper, more available and easier to use, print endowed words with an important additional dimension: immortality, or at least longevity, which in turn gave affirmation and legitimacy to the authors. Printing for pleasure, while it may have been undertaken in private produced, by virtue of multiplication, items more public than their written counterparts. Print was seen as indelible, formal and valid while the products of the pen were ephemeral. Printing also had wide appeal because it straddled both the arts and sciences and allowed the public to engage with a new and fashionable technology whether for recreation, vanity, education or practical purposes.

⁶⁷ Moran, 'Printing on the Thames' (1963).

⁶⁸ Richard Thompson, *Chronicles of London Bridge* (London: 1872), 492.