

Design
in British
publishing
since 1940 5/

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making books

5 1/2 pt → THE BRITISH LIBRARY & OAK KNOLL PRESS → 5 pt

Design in British Publishing Since 1945

Alan Bartram

London: British Library and Oak Knoll Press, date???

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160 pages, 10 x 11 inches, illustrated, \$39.95



Making Books: A Review and Critical Commentary

Colin Banks

This book aims to hold up a mirror to the best typographical practice of the time; Alan Bartram is a distinguished typographer, who both wrote and designed it. It is when wearing his designer's hat I note that, not just the layout of the cover text, not just to the first word but the very first letter, an italic 'D' is badly set out. The initial letters in these lines of type are carefully placed 'optically' aligning left in a vertical arrangement: however that 'D', the 'A' in Alan and the 'T' in The British Library stretch out desperately with the tips of their serifs but can't make the line up. That off my chest, I found this a very personal and enjoyable memoir in which this reader's recollections are prompted by the books that illustrate it and their thoughtful commentary. I felt more comfortable with its style than the prevailing smart-arse swipes at design by 'can't do themselves' media pundits, who see book design as a subset of marketing.

We start in 1942 with the author Ralph Tubbs, who was also the designer of the 1951 *Dome of Discovery*. (Not to be confused with the magnificent tent that now sits on the south bank of the Thames. The two buildings perhaps have their contemporary counterparts in books, the first contained a vision of national consensus, the second is about presentation but a bit short on content.) Tubbs speaks to us with shining eyes, brimming with optimism for a new world order (isn't that what *design* meant then?) but also warns that the future is not separate from the present. Bartram takes this message from the shilling Penguin book *Living in Cities* in which words and rough-edged pictures are integrated like a war-time documentary film.

The chronicle of the '40s and '50s continues with high culture, austerity production and popular prices: notably poetry books. We see 'London Poetry Editions' illustrated by Graham Sutherland, and Adprint's (an early packager) *Excursions into English Poetry*. This last was the great monument to these aspirational postwar years, seven anthologists published by Frederick Muller, each with sixteen autolithographs by John Piper, Michael Ayrton, William

Scott, Edward Bawden and Robert Colquhoun and lithographed cloth bindings; all printed by the exemplary W.S. Cowell who was concurrently printing ration books!

The series started in 1944 with *The Poet's Eye* illustrated by John Craxton, edited by Geoffrey Grigson. This set the agenda for the rest of them and indeed for the British arts of the next decade: A reinvigorated romantic pastoralism drawing on Samuel Palmer in his Shoreham period. I do not know what commercial success these books had but I bought my set new, one at a time for pennies in the mid-1950s, the jackets state 10/6 (old money), remainder books were with us then.

The neoromanticism reached out into the postwar re-discovery by British artists and authors of seductive Southern Europe: Elizabeth David on cookery illustrated by John Minton and Montin's embellishment of Alan Ross' Corsican journal *Time was Away* (John Lehmann, 1948).

At the end of the '40s the baton was taken up by Paul Elek who published the 'Camden Illustrated Classics' whose artists included Edward Burram, Anthony Gross and Barnett Freedman. Peter Ray was the designer, he was a beacon of sound typography for many years after. All this was to fall before the CIA promoted abstract impressionism. Bartram observes there was an improbable path to an 'Oxford Book of Incoherent Verse' illustrated by Frank Auerbach (I hasten to add it did not happen).

One of the many pleasures offered in these pages are the reproductions of those other pages, leaves from a past half remembered: John Minton's illustrations to *Le Grand Meaulnes*, all of which felt then like personal discoveries.

Book designers (as against artist-illustrators) are named throughout when known, but usually they are not credited. The first book designers I met in a great publishing house, were laboring in a stone-flagged passage behind a green baize door.

The actual look and feel of the print is difficult to convey and here the reproductions cover a great number of sins. Typography then was far from good — even within the limits of metal type; ‘fi’s’ not ligatured, ugly em-dashes, ‘widows’ that head up a page; but Bartram doesn’t smooth this over with nostalgia. The 1940s were not a golden age of the compositors’ art, but then came Tschichold in 1947 and after him Schmoller and from then until they went to the great composing room in the sky, Penguin style and standards ruled.

The book tells how Tschichold got a grip on the design of Penguins in a remarkably short time, first the title pages and margins only, then the typographical graces of tight word spacing, single quotes, en-dashes, etc. Bartram shows as ‘high’ Tschichold, the title page of *Romney Marsh*, (King Penguin, 1950); but this was after Tschichold had returned to Switzerland in 1949. I suspect the design had a little to do with his assistant, Erik Ellegaard Fredriksen, for as Schmoller would remark when such books came up for reprint “that damned Dane again, borders too close to the trimmed edge.” With Tschichold’s work and the Schmollers and their assistants, EEF, Ruari McLean, John Miles, Gerald Cinemon, etc., UK twentieth-century commercial book design moves, perhaps for the first time, in the Premier League.

In my view the physical production of English books now are sadly nothing to be proud of: thin paper covered boards, poor text paper, glued bindings; they have long been taken over by the best of the American, Swiss, German, Dutch, Italian presses and most others on the international stage. The miserable parsimony of mainstream British publishers has not seen the commission of an illustrator for a standard novel, or verse or essays for many years that I have seen. Long gone are the days of Fredrick Muller and the artists who did so much for ‘Excursions into English Poetry.’

Alan Bartram says that Tschichold’s impact and Schmoller’s twenty-five year reign, brought a quality to the text design of British books not approached before or after their work, “1950-70 saw the most civilized period of British book design and production for almost two-hundred years.” Although

newer technologies have brought with them the *potential* for better standards, as far as text setting is concerned, I would not quarrel with his judgment.

Half-way through the examples, we come across another Grigson book *An Englishman's Flora*. This was in the 1975 edition, beautifully produced and detailed and as Bartram points out there was still a harmony with the sixteenth-century woodcuts that illustrate it and the letterpress impression. It was designed, I think, by John Ryder but it is a book forever marred for me by the use of a sans serif copyright © in an otherwise serified setting; such is the pignicketytyness of our calling.

By 1980 we have an example of what the author calls 'book engineering,' a packaging publication by Rainbird *The Shell Encyclopedia of Sailing*. This combines a hierarchy of headlines, cross references, tables, photographs, graphs and diagrams: altogether a complexity of make-up far removed from a prose novel.

With such material book design *has* to move into another gear; it is information design with a longer lineage than 1980, and its many precedents include Florence Nightingale's charts of statistical analysis, railway timetables and the Baedekers, all from before the First World War.

Bartram gives a faint nod of approval to a Dorling Kindersley book *Wild Flowers of the Mediterranean* (1995): ending "without refined definition of photographic images, the use of a computer screen for design and page make-up, offset printing and international publishing, a production of this kind would have been well-nigh impossible — certainly at a popular price — forty years ago." (It is worth comparing this with the Collins 'New Naturalist' series that celebrated its one-hundredth title two years ago.)

However my 'Do it yourself' manual was doing all that Dorling Kindersley now does thirty years ago and I seem to remember others in these complex formats even earlier from Readers Digest; sneered at then as now by the book purists. But Readers Digest books, I believe, spilled over into DK.(?)

I have two editions of John Summerson's *Georgian London*. The original (1945) a straight text in letterpress; the revised edition (1988) supplemented with informative pictures and their captions, a more 'articulated' layout and all the other skills of the information designer. But what I miss in the second heavily illustrated, diagrammed and cap-tioned edition is the uninterrupted voice of the author, the knitted together mellifluous argument: It should not be so, I don't know why this happens. This I think is the nub of my problem with most of today's information books, there is not someone there behind the text with a clearly recognized voice and point of view and this knocks on into the pre-formatted specifications for such books as they are produced in this new millenium.

Guide books have special problems that show this well. One of the most professional shown here is from the hand and type scale of Gerald Cinamon. But also in complete contrast we are invited to study Wainwright's *Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells*. There is nothing else quite like this series of seven hillwalker pocketbooks. All pages were drawn by the Borough Treasurer of Kendal, same size, with text hand-lettered. They are arrogantly opinionated, but completely amateur in conception and production. In their first thirty years, they sold one-million copies and march on even more determinedly and curmudgeonly now, some forty-five years later.

An altogether gentler but similar approach has recently appeared, *The Heart of Oxford*, designed, illustrated and published by Phillip Atkins and Michael Johnson, who are well trained in their arts. Clued-up foreign visitors I have enjoyed giving copies to have described it as "a typographical pearl" and "a treasure." Get it, the ISBN is 0953443809 and it costs eight pounds.

The growth of the exhibition catalog is charted, from the eight-page Arts Council pamphlet of the 1940s to today's exhaustive pictorial, sociological and bibliographical apparatus, sometimes weighing 2.5 kg. There is a nod to the consistently good (throughout this period) Royal Scottish Academy productions (design by HMSO and others). But the best catalog around in the '50s and '60s came from the Stedlijk museum via its typographically

concerned director Willem Sandberg; these may be thought outside the remit of this book, however, the long, long series of excellent catalogs from Marlborough Fine Art designed from 1950 to the 1990s by Gordon House should certainly have been noted, they established more than any others a mainstream Swiss modernist pattern for art catalogs in the UK.

It is a comfortable step from here to look at what was going on at the Architectural Press in the 1950s and 1960s. Bartram puts it well "vivid sketches....tinted paper....richness and variation....clarendon (typeface) headings....the work of fully paid-up members of the human race."

Refreshingly, honor for good progressive design is shared with individual, small publishers, Alan Ross, John Evelyn, John Lehmann, Lund Humphries, Adprint and Paul Ere. The author compares the integrity of their production to the mechanical processing of books by publishing conglomerates "moneymen....insist that cash flow governed all things."

Well one aspect of this multi-national marketing is the illustrated book, compressed to a pre-digestible formula. There is a similar editorial problem in the non-illustrated book also; my friend Donal Thomas' novel about Lewis Carroll *Belladonna* was dumbed down to *Mad Hatter Summer* for the stateside co-publisher, and again in the States the book *Schindler's Ark* was filmed as "Schindler's List."

Bartram is a reluctant admirer of the Dorling Kindersley guides, while still acknowledging their need for straight-jacketing the text, illustrations, diagrams and format before a word has been written. He deplores as I do their "post modern strangely old-fashioned detailing"; dropped initials, borders, run-around captions.

Book Design, would have been a better balanced history had more text-only books been included, but on a superficial level all the action has been in the illustrated book, while the great benefits that come from computer typesetting are just not obvious and sexy enough to look for. The author tries to redress this balance on one last page as he moves our attention to a

familiar litany of overlarge type, too little interline spacing, the designer's fear of incorrect hyphenation, wide word spacing, inter-letter spacing, and I would add the great solecism of computer-compressed characters. It is here that a plug for Jost Hochuli's *Designing Books* (Hyphen Press, 1996) may have been a benefit to someone.

Jacket designs accompanied by Bartram's consistently pungent comment, fill the last seven pages: Bartram lays at the feet of publishers' salesmen, the blame for jackets being from a different hand from the designer of the book (and too often divorced from the story they contain). Bartram points out the similarity between a book jacket and the poster, but regrets the absence of the modern Tom Eckersly, Abram Games and Hans Schleger who could do them with wit and imagination; I suspect that the publishers now as then would scarcely make it worth a poster designers while. Interestingly he posits, that if books are sold directly over the net all that will be necessary on the jacket is author and title.

The reproduction of the illustrations here, do what can be done to overcome the absence of the scale, texture and weight of the original book; but replace this with all the compulsive attraction of turning up lino to find an old newspaper underneath. It is difficult then to obey the calls to supper until every last paragraph has been read: so it is with this book. ■

Alan Bartram is a freelance typographer (as is his brother Harold). He wrote a key book on his subject *Lettering in Architecture* in 1975.

Colin Banks is design adviser to Oxford University Press and advisory board member for *Visible Language*.